NATION

Curfew relaxed after 7 days in epicentre of U'khand riots

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BUSINESS

UK fell into recession at the end of 2023

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SPORTS

Rohit, Jaddu make it India's day

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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Japan in recession, becomes 4th largest economy

TOKYO, 15 FEB

Japan's economy is now the world's fourth-largest after it contracted in the last quarter of 2023 and fell behind Germany. The government reported the economy shrank at an annual rate of 0.4per cent in October to December, according to Cabinet Office data on real GDP, though it grew 1.9per cent for all of 2023. It contracted 2.9per cent in July-September. Two straight quarters of contraction are considered an indicator an economy is in a technical recession. Both the Japanese and German economies are powered by strong small and medium-size businesses with solid productivity. *—PTI*

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Modi thanks Qatari Emir for release of 8 jailed Indians

DOHA, 15 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday thanked Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani for the release of eight Indians, previously on death row, even as the two leaders held extensive talks that set the stage for taking the bilateral ties to a higher level, especially in the spheres of investment, energy and new technology. After the talks at the majestic Amiri Palace in this Qatari capital city, Modi described his meeting with the Emir as "wonderful" and said the bilateral ties are growing stronger.*—PTI*

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SC scraps 'unconstitutional' electoral bonds ahead of polls

SC orders disclosure of donors, amount & recipients by 13 March

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

In a landmark verdict delivered within spitting distance of the Lok Sabha polls, the Supreme Court on Thursday scrapped the Modi government's electoral bonds scheme of anonymous political funding. The apex court termed it "unconstitutional" and ordered disclosure of the names of the purchasers, value of the bonds and their recipients.

Holding that the 2018 scheme was "violative" of the constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression and right to information, a five-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice DY Chandrachud comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna, BR Gavai, JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, said in its verdict delivered months ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. The court did not agree with the Centre's contention that it was meant to bring about transparency and curb black money in political funding.

Ordering closure of the scheme forthwith, the top court also directed State Bank of India, the authorised financial institution under the scheme, to submit by 6 March the details of electoral bonds purchased since 12 April, 2019 till date to Election Commission, which will publish the information on its official website by 13 March.

The five-judge bench headed by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud and comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna, BR Gavai, JB Pardiwala and Manoj Mishra during pronouncement of verdict on electoral bond scheme on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

Under the electoral bonds scheme, ruling parties can coerce people and entities to contribute, the apex court said and rejected as "errorneous" the Centre's argument that it protects confidentiality of the contributor which is akin to the system of secret ballot.

In its two separate but unanimous verdicts cumulatively spanning 232 pages, the top court also directed the SBI to share details, including the "date of purchase of each electoral bond, the name of the purchaser of the bond and the denomination of the electoral bond purchased".

- In October last year, the bench began hearing arguments on the four petitions, including those filed by Congress leader Jaya Thakur, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the NGO Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR).

The court ordered that uncashed electoral bonds, which are within the validity period of 15 days, shall be returned by the political party or the purchaser to the issuing bank which in turn shall refund the amount to the purchaser's account.

It said the deletion of a provision in the Companies Act permitting unlimited corporate contributions to political parties was "arbitrary and violative" of Article 14 (right to equality) of the Constitution.

The bench said integrity of the election process is pivotal for sustaining the democratic form of government and the Constitution also places the conduct of free and fair elections on a high pedestal.

The verdict said financial contributions to political parties are usually made for two reasons -- they may constitute an expression of support to the political party or the contribution may be based on a "quid pro quo".

In October last year, the bench began hearing arguments on the four petitions, including those filed by Congress leader Jaya Thakur, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the NGO Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 3

What did SC verdict say?

- Electoral bond scheme violates freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(a)
- Financial contributions are made either to support a party or in return for favours
- Companies should not make unlimited contributions to a party
- Govt tackling black money issue through bonds is not justified

What is an electoral bond?

Electoral bonds, notified by govt in 2018, allows anonymous donations to political parties. A person or company could buy these bonds from SBI in denominations ranging from Rs 1,000 to Rs 1 crore and donate them to a party. Then the bonds can be exchange for cash by 15 days. The bonds, which were exempt from tax, did not carry the name of the donor.

What was the issue?

Anonymous donors means people do not know who is sending money to the political parties. As a result, citizens do not know who the party is answerable to when voted to power. Before 2018, parties had to reveal donors who gave more than ₹2,000

What has SC ordered?

- SBI must stop issuing electoral bonds
- SBI asked to furnish details to ECI of bonds purchased and the purchasers since April 2019
- SBI must disclose details of each bond encashed by parties within 3 weeks (6 March)
- ECI must publish this information on its website
- Electoral bonds purchased within 15 days but not encashed by parties should be refunded by the party
- SC invalids amendments made in Representation of Peoples Act and the Income Tax laws

BONDS IN NUMBERS

₹16,518.11 cr
Revenue through bonds sale between 2018 and 2024

₹12,000 cr
Parties received bonds. Here is a breakdown

₹6,570.11 cr
BJP

₹1,123 cr
CONG

₹1,092 cr
TMC

₹912 cr
TRS

OTHERS: ₹2,001 CR

Assembly passes bill on Kannada signboards

BENGALURU, 15 FEB

A bill mandating that Kannada displays of businesses and establishments must occupy 60 per cent of the space on signboards was passed by Karnataka Legislative Assembly on Thursday.

Non-compliance would lead to cancellation of the licences of businesses, the government asserted in the House.

The Kannada Language Comprehensive Develop ment (Amendment) Bill, 2024, amends the 2022 act. The amendment makes a provision to ensure that commercial, industrial and business undertakings, trusts, counselling centres, hospitals, laboratories, amusement centres and hotels, among others functioning with the approval and sanction of the government or local authorities, display information in Kannada language on 60 per cent of the space on name boards. Information in Kannada shall be displayed in the upper half of the signboard, the bill said.

Moving the bill for the consideration of the House, Kannada and Culture Minister Tangadagi Shivaraj Sangappa said the government is framing rules to enforce the law. "In the rules, we will provide for cancellation of licences. Only when licences are cancelled will businesses and establishments feel the pinch. At the time of issuing fresh licences or renewing existing licences, we will first ensure that they have complied with the rules on using Kannada in (name) boards," Tangadagi said. *—PTI*

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Farooq hints at quitting INDIA, Omar says no

SRINAGAR, 15 FEB

National Conference is a part of INDIA grouping and will continue to be, party leader Omar Abdullah clarified on Thursday and said it is in talks with Congress for an arrangement in three of the six Lok Sabha seats in Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh.

Omar's statement came shortly after NC chief Farooq Abdullah said the party would contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections and possible Assembly polls in the Union Territory on its own.

"We were a part of the INDIA alliance and we still are. Things have been taken out of context. The main idea of the group-ing is to defeat BJP because there is no point in sailing in two boats," Omar said with his father, also the party's Srinagar MP, by his side.

Farooq, he said, was echoing the general sentiments of party workers. "NC workers want to fight elections on all six seats but the truth is that sometimes for a bigger objective, small sacrifices have to be made. If the bigger objective is to win seats back from BJP, it is necessary for the National Conference to enter into a seat sharing understanding with the Congress. Our doors are open," the party's vice-president said. Informal talks with the Congress are already on and there is scope for further discussions, he said. *—PTI*

2 ARRESTED FOR PRACTICING UNTOUCHABILITY

KOPPAL, 15 FEB

Koppal rural police have arrested two people and is searching for another in the taluk for practising untouchability in commercial establishments.

The accused are hotel owner Sanjivappa, 54, and barber shop owner Venkoba, 43. They reportedly denied services to Dalits. One accused is currently absconding.

Untouchability is a persistent issue in Halavarthy. Reportedly, Dalits have been barred from entering hotels, barbershops, and even denied basic services like haircuts. Dalits have been subjected to segregation, with establishments resorting to excuses like service unavailability when approached by members of the community. The shopkeepers allegedly used explicit caste-based remarks against them.

—Salar News

SANDESHKHALI ROW

Widespread fear, systematic abuse by police, TMC: NCW

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

NCW in its fact-finding report from West Bengal's Sandeshkhali said it has gathered disturbing testimonies from women of widespread fear and systematic abuse by both police officers and members of Trinamool Congress.

However, West Bengal Police said it has received only four complaints from people in violence-hit Sandeshkhali but none of them mentioned rape or sexual harassment. "Women who dared to speak out against such atrocities faced immediate retaliation, including property confiscation, arbitrary arrests of male family members and further acts of brutality," it said.

A team from NCW visited Sandeshkhali to assess the actions taken by the local authorities in response to reports of egregious violence and intimidation against women in the region.

West Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose with women protesters and others at Sandeshkhali **PHOTO: PTI**

NCW said the team's findings revealed a distressing pattern of negligence and complicity on the part of Bengal government and law enforcement officials.

Delina Khongdup, an NCW member, expressed "profound dismay" at the attitude displayed by local police authorities during their visit to Sandeshkhali.NCW claimed that DGP reportedly refused to cooperate with NCW team and Superintendent of Police failed to provide any assistance to it. *—PTI*

>>>More on Pages 3 & 5

CALL FOR BHARAT BANDH

FARMERS HOLD TALKS WITH CENTRE, BLOCK TRAINS

Members of various organisations block railway tracks at Rajpura as they stage 'rail roko' protest in support of farmers agitating at Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border, in Patiala, on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

Ludhiana/ Hoshiarpur, New Delhi, 15 Feb

Three Union ministers began their third round of talks with the leaders of protesting farmer unions in Chandigarh on Thursday. This was amid a standoff between the protesters and security personnel at two points on the Punjab-Haryana border.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann also joined the meeting. Ministers Arjun Munda, Piyush Goyal and Nityanand Rai are representing the Centre in the meeting over farmer unions' various demands, including a law guaranteeing Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops.

Farmers from Punjab began their march to the national capital on Tuesday, but were stopped by security personnel at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points with Haryana. The protesting farmers have been camping at the border points.

> **The agitation when elections are drawing near is a political protest in the name of farmers. It is part of a conspiracy by a few organisations and international movements.**
>
> -Shobha Karandlaje, Union Minister

Haryana security forces have used tear gas on them to try and disperse them.

Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), part of SKM, had earlier called for a Bharat Bandh on 16 February.

Separately, farmers squatted on railway tracks at many places in Punjab over the Haryana Police's action against 'Delhi Chalo' protesters.

The decision was taken in protest against the use of tear gas shells and water cannons against the protesting farmers by the Haryana security personnel at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points.

Meanwhile, on the call of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha, farmers also staged demonstrations at several toll plazas in Punjab to protest against the Haryana Police action.

Meanwhile, Delhi Police has placed orders for more than 30,000 tear gas shells, an official said, as the force prepares to prevent Punjab farmers from entering the national capital. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 3

CM WRITES TO MP CM OVER DETAINED RYOTS

BENGALURU, 15 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday requested his Madhya Pradesh counterpart Mohan Yadav to release the detaied farmers from the State

"A group of farmers from Karnataka travelling from Bengaluru to Delhi to participate in a protest against the anti-farmer policies of the Central government have been detained in Bhopal without any reason," he said letter to Yadav.

"It has been four days since the farmers have been detained and they have not been released yet, Siddaramaiah said. "It is now learnt that your police authorities are shifting them to Varanasi. Travelling to Delhi to participate in a peaceful protest is the Constitutional right of the people. It is highly unfortunate that farmers who are seeking better policies are being arrested and ill-treated by police authorities in Madhya Pradesh," the letter said. Siddaramaiah requested Yadav to look into this and get the farmers released. *—PTI*

FACEBOOK, X WITHHOLD MULTIPLE ACCOUNTS LINKED TO FARMERS' PROTEST

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Social media platforms such as X and Facebook have withheld accounts that have been posting content about the farmers' protest. According to The Wire, X accounts and Facebook pages of farm leaders Sarvan Singh Pandher, Tejveer Singh Ambala, Ramandeep and Harpal Sangha were withheld. A media outlet spreading awareness on the issue faced same action. In February 2021, the government withheld the accounts of farmers' union pages and accounts of farmer leaders, who were protesting against three agriculture laws.

In June 2023, former Twitter CEO Jake Dorsey said that the Centre had threatened to shut down the social media network in the country. "India had many requests of us around the farmers' protests, around journalists that were critical of the Cente," he said.

—Salar News

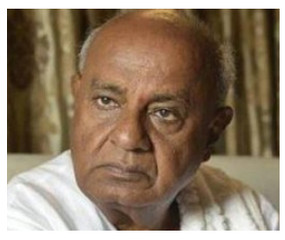


PHOTO: PTI

Deve Gowda clarifies he is in good health

BENGALURU, 15 FEB

The news regarding former prime minister HD Deve Gowda's health went viral on media and internet on Thursday. The news read that Gowda was suffering from breathing problems and was admitted to a private hospital in the City. However in the evening, the 91 year old JDS Leader, clarified on X saying, "I learn that some exaggerated reports are appearing on news channels with regard to my health. I wish to clarify that I am in the hospital only for routine check ups. I'll be back home soon. There is no cause for any worry." The hospital had also released an official statement saying, "His present condition is stable." *—Salar News*

Upset over wife's reels' obsession, man ends life

CHAMARAJANAGAR, 15 FEB

Allegedly annoyed by his wife's obsession over making Instagram reels, a 34-year-old man died by suicide after hanging himself from a tree in Hanuru area here on Thursday, police said. Kumar, who worked as a coolie, did not like his wife being constantly glued to social media platforms where she often made and uploaded reels, they said. A preliminary enquiry has suggested that Kumar objected to his wife's obsession, but she did not pay heed and continued doing it, police said. This often led to arguments between the couple and when things reached a flashpoint, Kumar hung himself from a tree, a senior police officer said. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Woman ends life by jumping into river from moving train

MANGALURU, 15 FEB

A woman, 27, ended her life by jumping into the Netravati river here from a running train on Thursday morning, police sources said. The deceased, MG Nayan, a native of Tumakuru, going by the details of the Aadhar card in the bag she left behind in the train. She was travelling on a Kannur-Bengaluru-Mangaluru train. The body of the woman, floating in the river, was later recovered by local diving experts and shifted to Bantwal government hospital for post-mortem. The exact identity of the woman and the motive for the extreme step are yet to be ascertained, sources said. Bantwal city police station ASI Devappa Vijayakumar visited the spot. *—PTI*

PHOTO: SALAR

5-year-old tiger captured in Mysuru

MYSURU, 15 FEB

On Thursday early morning a 5-year-old tiger was captured by the Forest Department in Mysuru. The tiger was capture by using the new walkthrough cage. The department used the latest Wildlife Advance Alert System to alert the villagers around about the tigers, according to the press release. A medical examination was performed for the tiger and the Vetarnarian said the tiger is healthy and strong. The department is looking for a tiger reserve to release the cub. *—Salar News*

Task force to monitor Kannada signboards

Karnataka Assembly passes bill mandating use of Kannada on 60% space of signboards

BENGALURU, 15 FEB

State government would form task forces apart from an enforcement wing comprising police personnel in every district to ensure compliance of the new bill mandating Kannada on signboards, Kannada and Culture Minister Tangadagi Shivaraj Sangappa said.

The minister said the problem of Kannada not being used on name boards exists only in Bengaluru. In Bengaluru, the government will form committees in all eight municipal zones; "these committees will receive complaints on Kannada. We are also coming out with an app called 'Kangavalu' for this," he added.

The Karnataka Cabinet on 5 January gave its approval to an ordinance to amend the Kannada Language Comprehensive Development Act that mandates use of the State's language in 60 per cent space on signages.

Welcoming the bill, Leader of the Opposition R Ashoka stressed on the need to impose fines. "Even if you make it 80 per cent (use of Kannada), we will support it. But what we pass should not remain only as an Act. Impose hefty fines, it's the only thing that will work.

Bengaluru recently saw violent protest over business not putting up Kannada signboards *PHOTO: PTI*

- The Cabinet on 5 January gave its approval to an ordinance to amend the Kannada Language Comprehensive Development Act that mandates use of the State's language in 60 per cent space on signages

Otherwise, (business and establishments) won't care," he said.

Lord Ram heated topic again

Lord Ram again became the reason for heated exchanges between the ruling and Opposition parties in the Assembly on Thursday. During Zero Hour, BJP Mangaluru MLA Bharath Shetty said an FIR was filed against him "for supporting Hinduism". The FIR was filed against Shetty and BJP MLA Vedavyasa Kamath for protesting against a teacher in St Gerosa School who allegedly made derogatory remarks against Lord Ram.

"I have been here in Bengaluru since 12 February attending the Assembly. The FIR has been filed for creating communal tension when I was not even in the place," Shetty said.

Supporting the MLA, the BJP leaders attacked the Congress government for not filing a case against the teacher but are filing against people who are condemning it. Health and Family Welfare Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao said, "BJP's only intention is to create communal tension."

Issuing of BPL, APL cards from April 1

Minister of Food and Civil Supplies KH Muniyappa said a total of 2,95,986 applications are pending for getting BPL and APL cards and they will be cleared by 31 March and the new applications will be accepted from 1 April. Ashoka questioned if the government is delaying the BPL cards to not increase the beneficiaries of their guarantee schemes.

Separate constituency for Pourakarmikas

BJP leaders urged the government to include pourakarmikas under BBMP in Legislative Council. A constituency should be reserved like teachers' constituency to make them part of decision making process.

—Salar News

Oppn flays govt over Governor labelled 'Kannada hater'

Bengaluru, 15 Feb

Opposition leader R Ashoka urged Minister Tangadagi Shivaraj Sangappa to give an explanation after a section of media portrayed Governor as a Kannada hater for sending back the ordinance on Kannada signboards. "Since the Assembly dates were already announced, the Governor cannot sign an ordinance and he sent it back to the Assembly. Though I had submitted the ordinance a month before the announcement, the Governor was suffering from health issues and hence he could not sign and sent it back," Sangappa said. JDS leader and former chief minister HD Kumaraswamy attacked the Congress for blaming Central government for unfair distribution of tax share. "The funds from the Central government have already been distributed, there is no point in fighting for it now. If there was real injustice, I would have supported them," Kumaraswamy said. Kumara swamy claimed that 40 per cent of the funds released from the Centre were not utilised. *—Salar News*

Govt wants to offer English medium in more schools

Bengaluru, 15 Feb

Minister for School Education and Literacy Madhu Bangarappa on Thursday told the Legislative Assembly that the government intends to offer English as a medium of instruction in more state-run schools, in view of the rising demand for it, and to promote enrollments. The minister said there is a huge demand for English medium schools in the state and, in the next three years, the government wants to open 500 more Karnataka Public Schools (KPS), that also offer English medium of instruction, in addition to Kannada. Bangarappa was responding to Tirthahalli BJP MLA Araga Jnanendra who said government schools are being closed because parents want their kids to get English medium education. "There is a huge demand for English mediums. As the government, we have a responsibility to take steps by also giving priority to Kannada...(but) parents themselves want an English medium for their children," Bangarappa said.

—Salar News/PTI

Marriage registration goes online in State

BENGALURU, 15 FEB

Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda inaugurated the marriage registration process, following the State cabinet's approval to amend the Hindu Marriage Registration Act, which will enable online registrations.

Speaking to the media on Thursday, Gowda highlighted the convenience of the initiative. He said, "Now the individuals no longer need to visit the sub-registrar's office for registering their marriage under the Hindu Marriage Act. Instead, a certificate can be generated from the comfort of one's home by providing necessary documents such as the wedding invite, video, and Aadhaar details." He added that this move is another step towards transparency and efficient service delivery.

Earlier in the cabinet meeting on 2 February the government proposed allowing marriage registrations through the Kaveri 2.0 portal, as well as at GramOne and Bapuji Service Centers in rural areas.

Krishna Byre Gowda *PHOTO: FB*

Additionally, the State government has authorised the inspector general of registration and commissioner of stamps to utilise Aadhaar authentication for marriage registrations. This simplification aims to increase the number of marriage registrations, strengthen the registration process, and reduce the risks associated with identity impersonation and fraudulent registrations. *—Salar News*

FILING THE NOMINATIONS

Chief minister Siddharamaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, AICC General Secretary Randeep Surjewala along with Rajya Sabha candidate from Karnataka, Ajay Makan, during filing the nominations at Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru on Thursday *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

Rajendra instructed the police department to conduct an assessment of unscientific speed humps *PHOTO: SALAR*

Will take action for accidents: Mysuru DC

MYSURU, 15 FEB

Deputy Commissioner KV Rajendra said stringent action will be taken against officials responsible for frequent accidents that claimed the lives of three people due to an unscientific hump on JC College Road near Mysuru University.

Rajendra instructed the police department to conduct an assessment of unscientific speed humps and submit a report within a week for remedial action. There is a need to take proactive measures to prevent such accidents in the future, said Rajendra at a Road Safety Committee meeting here on Thursday. "Efforts must be made to inform the public about ongoing road repairs and construction activities. Road markings, signage and information about alternative routes should be prominently displayed to enhance road safety," Rajendra said.

Highlighting the alarming road accidents in the City, Rajendra said 31 fatalities were reported in rural areas of Mysuru and an additional 16 in urban areas in January alone. "Each life lost in a road accident is tragic," he said. *—Salar News*

POLICE BUST PROSTITUTION GANG, 2 HELD

MYSURU, 15 FEB

Odanadi Seva Samsthe and Vijayanagar police busted a gang that had pushed a minor girl into prostitution and rescued the 16-year-old from a village in Tumakuru.

Two accused, Koorgalli natives Lohit and Kantharaju, were arrested. It was the second time that the girl was rescued from trafficking. When the girl was studying in Class 10, a youth sexually exploited her and pushed her into prostitution.

KV Stanley, Founder-Director of Odanadi organisation, received a tip-off that minor girls and young women of Bangladesh were pushed into prostitution. He informed ACP Gajendraprasad, Vijayanagar Police Station Inspector Pradeep and SI Vishwanath. *—Salar News*

PSI suspended, booked for assaulting woman in Mandya

MANDYA, 15 FEB

A Police Sub Inspector was suspended and booked on charges of assaulting a 39-year-old woman tending cows at Ashok Nagar in Mandya district.

A case was registered against Police Sub-Inspector Ayyana Gowda after a complaint was filed by the victim, Rupadevi, a resident of Ashok Nagar.

Rupadevi and her mother raise cows for a living and sell milk to people in the neighbourhood. There were complaints that their cows were roaming on the roads, causing inconvenience to neighbours. Police officials led by Gowda came to Rupadevi's house on Tuesday and forcibly took her to the police station.

A case was registered against Police Sub-Inspector Ayyana Gowda after a complaint was filed *PHOTO: SALAR*

They allegedly physically assaulted her, resulting in swelling and bruises on both her hands and feet. She was admitted to Mandya Institute of Medical Sciences for treatment

A group of citizens, including farmer activist Sunanda Jayaram and members of Karnataka Janashakti, came to the police station to offer support to Rupadevi. *—Salar News*

School incident: Case against BJP MLAs in M'luru

MANGALURU, 15 FEB

The Pandeshwar police station has received a complaint against two MLAs, two corporators of the Mangaluru City Corporation (MCC), and the leader of an organisation, accusing them of threatening the administrative board of St Gerosa School in Mangaluru.

The complaint specifically names BJP MLAs Vedavyas Kamath of Mangaluru South legislative constituency, MLA Bharat Shetty of Mangaluru North legislative constituency, and corporators Bharat and Sandeep Garodi.

According to the complaint, an audio clip went viral, alleging that Sr Prabha, a teacher from the school, made derogatory remarks about Hindu deities during a class. Subsequently, MLA Vedavyas Kamath, along with MLA Bharat Shetty, corporators Sandeep Garodi, Bharat Kumar, and Bajrang Dal leader Sharan Pumpwell, purportedly raised slogans of 'Jai Shri Ram' outside the school without consulting the school's administrative board. They also allegedly made derogatory remarks against the Christian religion.

In response to the controversy, the school administration board promptly suspended Prabha, the accused teacher. Reacting to this incident, the archbishop of the Archdiocese of Bengaluru Archbishop Peter Machado expressed disappointment that the institution, along with many other Christian establishments in the area, faced undue humiliation from the locals and BJP party members.

He also raised his voice for a thorough investigation. Questioning the rise of mob rule, Archbishop Machado called for faith in a fair and orderly system of justice to prevail, one that fosters peace and harmony in society. Home Minister G Parameshwara clarified that an FIR was filed against Shetty for going to the school and telling the parents that they should not admit their children to Christian schools.

—Salar News

SAVITA KAMBLE ELECTED AS MAYOR OF BELAGAVI CORPORATION

BELAGAVI, 15 FEB

BJP corporator Savita Kamble was on Thursday elected unopposed as the Mayor of Belagavi City Corporation.

Anand Chavan was elected as Deputy Mayor during the election held for both posts in the council hall of the civic body. While the post of mayor is reserved for scheduled caste women candidates, deputy mayor is for general category. Only two candidates eligible for the post of mayor in the ruling BJP group -- Savita Kamble, representing ward no 17 and Laxmi Rathod, representing ward no 35. Both Kamble and Laxmi Rathod had submitted nominations. *—PTI*

KRUPENDRA REDDY IN

BJP-JD(S) fields surprise candidate for RS polls

BENGALURU, 15 FEB

Rajya Sabha election scene in the State has hotted up with BJP-JD(S) combine fielding its second candidate, even though the alliance has the strength to win only one out of the four seats. Biennial election to fill four vacancies from Karnataka in Rajya Sabha, by the elected Members of Legislative Assembly, is scheduled for 27 February.

On the final day of nomination submissions, candidates from Congress and BJP-JD(S) alliance filed their nominations at Vidhana Soudha on Thursday. BJP-JD(S) candidate Narayana Bandage was nominated for the polls earlier, but on the last day of filing nominations, the alliance fielded former Rajya Sabha member Kupendra Reddy, springing a surprise.

Rajya Sabha candidate from Karnataka, Krupendra Reddy, with JD(S) President HD Kumaraswamy, before filing the nominations at Vidhana Soudha, on Thursday *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

The nomination papers were submitted to the Secretary of the Legislative Assembly, with BJP State President BY Vijayendra, Opposition leader R Ashoka, former chief minister HD Kumaraswamy and BJP State General Secretary Sunil Kumar present along with the candidates. Vijayendra accused the Congress of conspiring against the Centre, asserting confidence in NDA's return to power in the upcoming elections. On the Congress side, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivkumar, Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda, Women and Child Development Minister Lakshmi Hebbalkar and Shanti Nagar MLA Mohammed Harris were present along with the candidates. The party has fielded Ajay Maken, Syed Naseer Hussain and GC Chandrasekhar as party candidates from the State.

Shivakumar said the Congress expects to garner "conscience votes" from members of JD(S) and BJP for its candidates in the Rajya Sabha elections. "BJP and JD(S) always indulge in horse trading and they are known for that. JD(S) thinks that BJP will support them, but wait and watch till 27 February and you will know how many votes they get from BJP," he said.

In the current Rajya Sabha quota from the State, three seats are held by Congress and one by BJP. Congress has 135 MLAs and has the strength to win three with 45 votes each. BJP-JD(S) alliance has 84 votes and can win the second seat if six more MLAs support them.

—Salar News

PHOTO: PTI

TMC's Mimi Chakraborty quits as MP

KOLKATA, 15 FEB

Popular Bengali actor and TMC MP Mimi Chakraborty met Party Chief Mamata Banerjee and expressed her desire to quit as a parliamentarian, on Thursday. Chakraborty, a first-time MP from Jadavpur, went to state assembly in the afternoon to meet Banerjee.It was, however, not clear whether Banerjee accepted Chakraborty's resignation. Asked why she tendered her resignation to Banerjee and not to Lok Sabha Speaker as per norms, Chakraborty said, "Once I get the nod from TMC, I will submit it to the Speaker." The development comes months ahead of general elections.—*PTI*

Ex-Congress MLA Mohanty quits party

BHUBANESWAR, 15 FEB

Former Odisha Congress MLA Anshuman Mohanty resigned from the party. Mohanty, who was elected to state Assembly from Rajnagar constituency in Kendrapara district in 2014, stepped down from both his primary membership in the party and his role as President of Kendrapara District Congress Committee. He submitted his resignation letter to party state president Sarat Pattanayak on Wednesday. Mohanty conveyed his gratitude to party leaders and workers for their support during his tenure with Congress. However, the ex-MLA did not mentioned the reason behind his resignation from the party. Mohanty's resignation comes two days after the resignation of Nihar Ranjan Mohananda, another ex-MLA of Congress.Mohananda who was elected to state Assembly from Attabira (SC) constituency in 2009, had resigned from the primary membership of the party on 12 February. He had tendered his resignation letter to party President Mallikarjun Kharge.—*PTI*

UDF disrupts Assembly Session in Kerala

T'PURAM, 15 FEB

Kerala Assembly saw Opposition UDF disrupting House proceedings by holding up a banner and placards, accusing Left government of being "looters", on Thursday. The uproar from Congress-led UDF came after Speaker AN Shamseer did not allow Leader of Opposition in Assembly VD Satheesan to continue with his allegations against state Food and Supplies Minister GR Anil.Satheesan initially submitted th Minister insulted the House by announcing to reporters outside Assembly about Government's new pricing mechanism for SupplyCo when the issue was being discussed in the House. —*PTI*

Welfare scheme for Naxal affected villages in Ch'garh

RAIPUR, 15 FEB

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Thursday said the state government will launch 'Niyad Nellanar' scheme to ensure basic amenities and benefits of welfare projects reach Naxal affected villages.Speaking in the Assembly, he said facilities will be provided to residents of such villages similar to the benefits under the Centre's PM-JANMAN scheme, which is aimed at socio-economic welfare of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).Niyad Nellanar in the local Dandami dialect (spoken in south Bastar) means "aapka achcha gaon" or "your good village". Talking to reporters on the Assembly premises, Sai said, "Under the new scheme, the effort will be to provide amenities and benefits in villages located within 5 kilometres of security camps in Bastar region through these camps only." Sub health centre, primary school, helipad etc will also be established along with all weather roads, Sai said.—*PTI*

Oppn hails SC verdict on electoral bonds

BJP alleges Oppn is politicising the issue as they do not have any alternative to Modi's leadership

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Leaders of several Opposition parties on Thursday hailed the Supreme Court verdict striking down the electoral bonds scheme and termed it an important step in ensuring transparency in electoral funding. Congress said it will reinforce the power of votes over notes, with party President Mallikarjun Kharge hoping the Modi government will stop resorting to such "mischievous ideas" in future.

BJP, however, alleged that the opposition parties are politicising the issue as they do not have any alternative to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.Supreme Court in a landmark judgment delivered a big blow to the government and annulled the electoral bonds scheme for political funding, saying it violates the constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression as well as the right to information.

Kharge said the Congress had called the scheme "opaque and undemocratic" when it was launched. Subsequently, in the 2019 manifesto, the Congress promised to scrap the Modi government's "dubious scheme".

Congress President Kharge said Congress had called the scheme 'opaque and undemocratic' when it was launched **PHOTO: PTI**

"We welcome the decision of the Supreme Court which has struck down this 'Black Money Conversion' scheme of the Modi government, calling it 'unconstitutional'."We hope that the Modi government will stop resorting to such mischievous ideas in future and listens to the Supreme Court so that democracy, transparency and level-playing field persist," the Congress chief said.

Reacting to the verdict, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi said, "Another proof of Narendra Modi's corrupt policies is in front of you. The BJP had made electoral bonds a medium for taking bribe and commission. Today a stamp has been put on this."Defending the electoral bonds scheme as a measure brought in to bring transparency in electoral funding, BJP spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad said his party respects the Supreme Court verdict. Prasad said the parties whose "DNA is based on corruption and bribery" should not level such charges against the BJP. Welcoming the judgment, the CPI(M) said it was an "unscrupulous scheme designed to help the ruling party" and it was now essential to introduce reforms for political and electoral funding.

Aam Aadmi Party welcomed the decision saying it is an important step in ensuring transparency in election funding. The ruling DMK and the opposition AIADMK in Tamil Nadu too hailed the verdict. —*PTI*

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS IN ELECTORAL BONDS CASE

Following is the chronology of events in the case related to validity of the electoral bonds scheme, a mode of funding to political parties, in which a five-judge Constitution bench of the Supreme Court on Thursday delivered a landmark verdict annulling it:

- **2017:** Electoral bond scheme was introduced in the Finance Bill.
- **14 Sept, 2017:** The NGO 'Association for Democratic Reforms', lead petitioner, moves SC challenging the scheme
- **3 Oct, 2017:** SC issues notices to Centre and EC on PIL filed by the NGO
- **2 Jan, 2018:** Central government notifies the Electoral Bond Scheme
- **7 Nov, 2022:** Electoral bond scheme was amended to increase the sale days from 70 to 85 in a year where any Assembly election may be scheduled
- **16 Oct 16, 2023:** SC bench headed by CJI DY Chandrachud refers pleas against the scheme to a five-judge Constitution bench.
- **31 Oct, 2023:** A five-judge Constitution bench headed by CJI DY Chandrachud commences hearing on pleas against the scheme
- **2 Nov, 2023:** SC reserves verdict
- **15 Feb, 2024:** SC delivers unanimous judgement annulling the scheme, saying it violates Constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression as well as the right to information —*PTI*

Ruling in favour of people's interest, says petitioner

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Supreme Court's decision to strike down the electoral bond scheme will help bring in transparency in political funding and protect the interest of people, Congress leader Jaya Thakur, who had challenged the scheme in the apex court, said on Thursday.

"Those who were donating money through electoral bonds were not disclosing their names. Somewhere they would want favours from the government... This verdict will make a difference. It will protect the interest of people," Thakur said.

Videos after the verdict. Advocate Varun Thakur, who represented her in the case, described the ruling as a historical step for democracy. —*PTI*

FARMERS' PROTEST

Clockwise from left: Farmers in wheelchairs protest at the Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border during their 'Delhi Chalo' march; Workers construct a concrete barricade at Ghazipur border; Farmers set up camp at Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border; Police use tear gas to disperse farmers on Thursday **PHOTOS: PTI**

PM must talk to mins: Farmer leader

CHANDIGARH, 15 FEB

- Despite the force used against farmers, the farmer leaders were going to hold talks with the three Union ministers on Thursday, he said

Ahead of a meeting with a panel of the Centre, farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher on Thursday said the Prime Minister should speak to the three visiting Union ministers to resolve the farmers' issues.Agriculture and Farmer Welfare Minister Arjun Munda, Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal and Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai will meet the farmer leaders at 5 pm here over their various demands, including a law guaranteeing Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops.

Addressing the media at the Shambhu border, Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee general secretary Pandher said protesting farmers' demands should be accepted.

"We want that the Prime Minister should himself speak to the deputation (of union ministers) which is coming (for the meeting) and resolve the demands of farmers," he said.Referring to an action against farmers by the security personnel deployed by the Haryana authorities at the Punjab-Haryana border, Pandher slammed paramilitary personnel for using "force" against farmers, leaving many injured.Pandher claimed that the paramilitary force allegedly used smoke cell air bursts and smoke cell ground bursts against farmers.

Despite the force used against farmers, the farmer leaders were going to hold talks with the three Union ministers on Thursday, he said. —*PTI*

Internet suspended in Punjab till today

CHANDIGARH, 15 FEB

Internet services have been suspended in certain areas of Punjab's Patiala, Sangrur and Fatehgarh Sahib districts till today on the orders of the Ministry of Home Affairs.The order came in the wake of the farmers 'Delhi Chalo' march.According to the ministry order, internet services will remain suspended in areas falling under police stations Shatrana, Samana, Ghanaour, Devigarh and Balbhera in Patiala. "In exercise of the power conferred by section 7 of Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 read with Sub-rule 1 of Rule 2 of the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules 2017, and in the interest of maintaining public safety and averting public emergency, it is necessary and expedient to order, the temporary suspension of internet services from 18:00 Hrs on February 12, 2024 to 23:59 Hrs on February 16, 2024 in the following areas," the order issued on 12 February said. —*PTI*

Sandeshkhali: Didi says 17 held, BJP stages walkout from Assembly

KOLKATA, 15 FEB

BJP MLAs on Thursday staged a walkout from assembly demanding a statement from Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sandeshkhali, which has witnessed protests over alleged atrocities on locals by ruling TMC leaders.

A team of National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) on Thursday visited trouble-torn Sandeshkhali in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district, which is now in the eye of a political storm.

Following this, BJP legislators shouted slogans against Government and staged a walkout.

"We decided to walk out as there is no statement from Chief Minister on the issue. Total lawlessness prevails in Sandeshkhali and we are not allowed to go there," Tigga said.

Meanwhile, Banerjee responded that 17 people have been arrested in restive Sandeshkhali and no one involved in any wrongdoing will be spared.

Mamata Banerjee **PHOTO: PTI**

"I have sent state women's commission there and formed a police team for Sandeshkhali," A "sinister design is at play" to foment trouble in the area and state government has taken all necessary actions to control the situation, Banerjee added.

Leader of Opposition in West Bengal Assembly, Suvendu Adhikari, along with three other BJP legislators were prevented from going to disturbed Sandeshkhali by police, on Thursday. Along with Adhikari, three other BJP legislators were Shankar Ghosh, Chandana Bauri and Tapasi Mondal.

Earlier, Adhikari and five other BJP legislators were stopped on Monday from visiting Sandeshkhali area in North 24 Parganas which became restive politically. BJP has been alleging sexual harassment by local Trinamool Congress leadership in Sandeshkhali.

Protests persisted in Sandeshkhali for the seventh consecutive day on Wednesday, with a significant number of women taking to the streets, demanding the arrest of TMC leader Shajahan Sheikh and his followers. —*PTI*

'Ajit Pawar faction is real NCP'

MUMBAI, 15 FEB

- The decision was criticised by the Sharad Pawar group as "copy-paste" of Narwekar's earlier decision on disqualification petitions filed by rival Shiv Sena factions

Maharashtra assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar on Thursday held that the NCP faction led by deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar was the real Nationalist Congress Party, and the anti-defection provisions in the Constitution can not be used to stifle internal dissent.

While dismissing disqualification petitions filed by the factions led by Ajit Pawar and his uncle Sharad Pawar against each other's legislators, Speaker noted that the Ajit group had "overwhelming legislative majority" of 41 out of 53 party MLAs when it decided to join the Shiv Sena-BJP government in July 2023.The Ajit Pawar group was, thus, the "real political party" when the factions emerged, Narwekar said.The ruling, which followed the Election Commission's decision last week holding the Ajit-led faction as the real NCP, was criticised by the Sharad Pawar group as "copy-paste" of Narwekar's earlier decision on disqualification petitions filed by rival Shiv Sena factions. "An invisible power" was trying to finish off two key Maharashtra-based parties, NCP MP and Sharad Pawar's daughter Supriya Sule alleged.

"All the petitions seeking disqualification of MLAs are rejected," Narwekar said, reading out the ruling at the legislature complex here earlier in the evening. Questioning then party supremo Sharad Pawar's decisions or defying his wishes did not amount to defection but it was only internal dissent, Narwekar said, adding that the tenth schedule of the Constitution, which provides for disqualification of a legislator in case of defection, was misused in this case.The events that unfolded in the NCP in July 2023 were clearly in the nature of intraparty dissent, and thedecisions of the Ajit Pawar faction constituted the will of the party', the Speaker said. —*PTI*

Filing of nominations for RS polls end

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

BJP chief JP Nadda, new party entrant Ashok Chavan and former Congress president Sonia Gandhi are among those in the fray for the Rajya Sabha elections with the deadline for filing of nominations ending Thursday.

The biennial elections are scheduled on 27 February in 56 seats - 10 in Uttar Pradesh, six each in Maharashtra and Bihar, five each in West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, four each in Gujarat and Karnataka, three each in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Rajasthan and Odisha, and one each in Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh.

However, a majority of the candidates are likely to get elected unopposed. 20 February is the last date of withdrawing candidature. Voting is scheduled to take place from 9 am to 4 pm on 27 February and the counting will be held on the same day from 5 pm onwards.In Uttar Pradesh, eight BJP candidates have filed nominations - former Union minister R P N Singh, former MP Chaudhary Tejveer Singh, state party general secretary Amarpal Maurya, former state minister Sangeeta Balwant, party spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi, former MLA Sadhna Singh, former Agra mayor Naveen Jain and local industrialist and former SP leader Sanjay Seth who joined the BJP in 2019.BJP repeated Union ministers Ashwini Vaishnaw and L Murugan as Rajya Sabha candidates from Odisha and Madhya Pradesh respectively. INDA's current strength in the Upper House of Parliament stands at 114, including 93 of the BJP. Congress has 30 seats. While 50 members will retire on 2 April, six will do so on 3 April. —*PTI*

BJP President JP Nadda files his nomination papers for Rajya Sabha polls, in Gandhinagar; Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw files his nomination papers in Bhubaneswar **PHOTO: PTI**

BIDDING BYE TO RAE BARELI

Sonia not to contest LS polls

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Former Congress president Sonia Gandhi informed voters of her Rae Bareli constituency in Uttar Pradesh that she will not contest the upcoming Lok Sabha polls due to health and age issues, on Thursday. In an emotional message to constituents of the segment she has represented since 2004, the 77-year-old also threw subtle hints of a possible entry of a member of her family from Rae Bareli segment.

"I am proud to say that whatever I am today, I am because of you and I have always done my best to honour your trust. After this decision, I will not have the opportunity to serve you directly but my heart and soul will always remain with you. I know that you will stand by me and my family in future, just as you have in the past," she said in the message. The message to the voters comes a day after former Congress President filed her nomination for Rajya Sabha seat from Rajasthan.Speculation is rife that Sonia Gandhi's daughter Priyanka Gandhi Vadra could contest from Rae Bareli Lok Sabha constituency this time. This is the first time that Sonia Gandhi would be entering Rajya Sabha.

Sonia Gandhi **PHOTO: PTI**

- Speculation is rife that Sonia Gandhi's daughter Priyanka Gandhi Vadra could contest from Rae Bareli Lok Sabha constituency this time

"I can never forget your staunch support for me through the adverse circumstances through the last two Lok Sabha elections," Gandhi recalled. Sending her respect to elders and love to youngsters, she said, "I will see you soon". —*PTI*

Delhi HC registrar general gets bomb threat; probe on

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Security was beefed up in Delhi High Court on Thursday following a bomb threat email sent to authorities. A senior police officer said the email was received by Delhi High Court's registrar general on his official account on Wednesday. Email sent by Balavant Desai to Delhi High Court registrar general warns that a blast will take place on Thursday and that it would be the biggest blast in Delhi.

"This will be the biggest explosion in Delhi. Call the minister as well, all will be blown up," the mail read.

Following the email, high court authorities have written a letter to Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora.

The letter stated that the competent authority of high court has taken serious note of the matter and requested the commissioner to enhance security arrangements in and around the high court complex forthwith.High court authorities have sought a detailed enquiry into the matter and submit a report at the earliest. *—PTI*

U'khand to get India's 1st helicopter medical service

DEHRADUN, 15 FEB

India's first Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) will be started from Uttarakhand, Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia on Thursday, Scindia said in a video shared on X. A helicopter will be stationed under the service at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) from where it will be sent anywhere within a radius of 150 km to airlift anyone who has met with an accident to the medical facility. "Assembly and certification of the helicopter to be deployed for the purpose is underway. It is on my dashboard. It is entirely my concern now not yours," he said. *—PTI*

3.4L Central forces to be deployed for LS, Assembly polls

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

A total of 3.40 lakh Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) personnel are likely to be deployed during the upcoming Lok Sabha elections as well as the assembly polls in Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha and Sikkim. Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) would decide to deploy CAPF following consideration of a proposal sent by Election Commission seeking the deployment of around 3,400 companies (3.40 lakh personnel) of the paramilitary wings in all states and Union Territories in a phased manner to ensure the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections. EC has sent the proposal to ministry following requests from the chief electoral officers UTs for deployment of CAPFs for election-related duties such as area dominance, confidence-building measures, poll day-related duties, guarding of EVMs and strong room centres and counting centre security during the forthcoming general elections and assembly elections. Lok Sabha elections are expected in April-May *—PTI*

Ch'garh: Naxalites killed 8 jawans, injured 53 in 60 days

RAIPUR, 15 FEB

Eight security personnel lost their lives and 53 others sustained injuries in Naxal incidents in Chhattisgarh in the last two months, state Assembly was informed on Thursday. Eight Naxalites were also killed in separate encounters with security personnel during this period. A total of 54 Naxal incidents, including encounters and IED (improvised explosive device) blasts, took place in state from 30 November, 2023, till 30 January 2024, said Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sharma, who also holds Home portfolio. "Of these incidents, seven security personnel and one 'gopniya sainik' (secret trooper) were killed and 53 injured in 20 incidents," Sharma said in a written reply in House to a question by Congress Legislative Party Leader Charan Das Mahant. *—PTI*

Curfew relaxed after 7 days in epicentre of U'khand riots

During relaxation, shops dealing in essentials will remain open

HALDWANI, 15 FEB

Authorities on Thursday relaxed curfew in Banbhoolpura area of the town for varied durations, seven days after it was imposed following the violence over the demolition of an "illegal" madrassa.

Banbhoolpura was the epicentre of the mob violence which included stone pelting and arson.

According to an order issued by Nainital District Magistrate Vandana Singh, curfew will be relaxed from 9 am to 4 pm in Gaujajali, Railway Bazar and FCI godown area.

However, in the rest of Banbhoolpura, it was relaxed for two hours from 9 am to 11 am.

During the curfew relaxation shops dealing in essentials will remain open and the residents will be allowed to out to buy essentials, the order said.

Curfew will be relaxed from 9 am to 4 pm in Gaujajali, Railway Bazar and FCI godown area, days after violence broke out over the demolition of a madrassa **PHOTO: PTI**

However, unnecessary movement of people even during relaxation in curfew will remain prohibited, it said.

Movement of Banbhoolpura residents will continue to be restricted to the area under curfew during the relaxation period not outside it.

Essential supply vehicles can ply in the area if they have a pass issued by the magistrate concerned.

Students in area under curfew will be permitted to go to their centres for the boards, university or other competitive examinations if they produce their admit cards, the DM's order said.

Any violation of the order will be punishable under section 188 of the CrPC, it said.

Violence broke out on 8 February over the demolition of an illegally built madrassa in the Banbhoolpura area, with locals hurling stones and petrol bombs at municipal workers and police, forcing many police personnel to seek refuge at a police station, which the mob then set on fire.

In the violence, six rioters were killed and more than a hundred, including police personnel and mediapersons, were injured, according to the police.

The curfew imposed in Banbhoolpura after the violence was was earlier lifted from the outer areas of the town. *—PTI*

MUSLIM SIDE SEEKS RELIEF

HC reserves order on pooja in Gyanvapi

PRAYAGRAJ, 15 FEB

Allahabad High Court has completed the hearing and reserved its order in an appeal moved by the Anjuman Intezamia Masajid Committee challenging the Varanasi District Court order that allowed the Hindu side to offer prayers in the southern cellar of Gyanvapi mosque.

The single bench of Justice Rohit Ranjan Aggarwal has called both the parties at 4pm on Thursday in its chamber and it is being speculated that the court will pronounce the verdict.

Senior advocates, SFA Naqvi and Puneet Gupta, representing Anjuman Intezamia Masajid Committee argued that "giving final relief through an interim order without determining the rights in the civil suit filed demanding the right to worship is a violation of the legal procedure."

"Moreover, District Judge himself has given two contradictory orders. It also said that in the exercise of the power inherent in Section 152 of the Code of Civil Procedure, the court cannot order a change in the nature of the original order," argued the advocates.

Senior Supreme Court advocates CS Vaidyanathan and Vishnu Shankar Jain appeared on behalf of the Hindu side.

On behalf of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust, CS Vaidyanathan argued through video conferencing. He presented arguments for about 40 minutes and said that the basement is situated on the right side of Gyanvapi.

"Where Hindus were worshipping till the year 1993. Under Order 40 Rule 1 CPC, Varanasi Court appointed DM as the receiver, so this decision does not affect the rights of Muslims in any way," argued CS Vaidyanathan

"Because a Muslim never offered namaz in the basement and when the court-appointed Varanasi DM as the receiver, he complied with the court's order," argued Vaidyanathan further.

On 31 January, the Varanasi district court allowed the Hindu side to offer prayers in the southern cellar of Gyanvapi mosque.

The court directed the Varanasi district magistrate to make arrangements within seven days for 'puja' to be performed by the Hindu side and a pujari (priest) nominated by Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust. After the order of the court, "pooja" and "aarti" were performed in the early hours on Thursday. *—ANI*

Modi gets warm welcome in Doha, meets Qatar's Emir

DOHA, 15 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a ceremonial welcome and met with Emir of Qatar in Doha on the second day of his official visit to Qatar, on Thursday.

Additionally, Modi also held a bilateral meeting with Emir of State of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

The meeting was also attended by External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar and National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval.

Modi arrived in Qatar's capital Doha on Wednesday night after inaugurating the first Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi and a series of bilateral meetings with prominent leaders.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs, during the meeting, two leaders exchanged views on expanding bilateral cooperation in sectors such as trade, investment, energy, finance, and technology.

People carrying Indian Tricolour and gifts for Modi chanted "Modi Modi" and "Bharat Mata Ki Jai." Modi shook hands with people who had gathered outside his hotel in Doha to welcome him. Some of the people even presented him with gifts like books. People also took pictures of Modi as he interacted with them.

Notably, this visit came on heels of a major diplomatic triumph for India, in which eight veterans of Indian Navy who were sentenced to death in Qatar on espionage charges, were released by Doha on Monday.

Seven out of the eight veterans have returned to India. *—ANI*

Narendra Modi hugs Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, in Doha on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

ALL SET FOR ATTUKAL PONGALA

A clay pot vendor waits for customers ahead of Attukal Pongala in Thiruvananthapuram on Thursday. Attukal Pongala is a 10-day festival celebrated at Attukal Bhagavathy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram. On the ninth day, millions of women gather around the temple to prepare food made of rice in earthen pots and offer it to Attukal Amma (temple goddess) **PHOTO: PTI**

Six arrested for looting arms from IRB camp in Manipur

IMPHAL, 15 FEB

Manipur Police have arrested six people for looting arms from India Reserve Battalion camp at Chingarel in Manipur's Imphal East district.

Four Insas rifles, one AK Ghatak, two magazines of SLR and 16 small boxes of 9mm ammunition looted from IRB camp have also been recovered.

Taking to X, police said, "In connection with the incident of arms looting case of 5th IRB, Chingarel, Imphal East by an unruly mob on the night of 13.02.2024, Manipur Police have arrested six people on Wednesday and they have been remanded to police custody by a judicial magistrate."

Police, however, did not mentioned from where the arms were recovered or from where the people were arrested.

An unruly mob broke into the camp of 5th IRB at Chingarel and fled with arms and ammunition. Following the incident, a large number of "village volunteers" also attempted to barge in at Manipur Police Training College at Pangei in Imphal East district, located around 5 km from Chingarel. *—PTI*

SC allows withdrawal of pleas against UAPA

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

In a sudden turn of events, individuals and groups who had challenged constitutional validity of the provisions of Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in Supreme Court withdrew their pleas on Thursday, saying they have decided to move appropriate forums.

A bench of Justices Bela M Trivedi and Pankaj Mithal, which had on Wednesday said it will not allow "proxy litigation" to challenge the vires of the anti-terror law UAPA, allowed as many as eight petitions to be withdrawn, after the petitioners' counsels said they would like to approach the jurisdictional high courts for relief.

The bench had asked the counsel for petitioners to seek instruction by Thursday whether they want to approach high court to quash FIR in UAPA cases or they want to challenge the vires of the law in top court.

Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for three civil society members, including a journalist, who were booked under the anti-terror law by Tripura Police in 2021 over their social media posts on riots in state, said he has received instructions from his clients to withdraw the petitions.

On Wednesday, it had said it would hear challenge to the vires of UAPA provisions by only those who are personally aggrieved by it and had refused to hear senior advocate Huzefa Ahmadi, who appeared for some writ petitioners challenging anti-terror law. The bench had said that in PIL matters, the doctrine of locus standi may not apply but where law has been challenged, there should be some involvement. *—PTI*

India to test 500 km cruise missile soon

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

India is planning to carry out the test of a 500Km strike range Submarine Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) from the east coast next month.

Indian defence forces' arsenal is also likely to get a boost as defence ministry is expected to take up the case for procurement of an 800km strike range land attack cruise missile in a meeting scheduled this week, defence officials said.

The missile system was developed by Defence Research and Development Organisation.

Submarine Launched Cruise Missile is planned to be one of the critical weapons of the indigenously manufactured submarines planned to be built by Indian Navy under Project 75 India.

Submarine Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) is indigenously developed with two variants.

The two variants are Land Attack Cruise Missile (LACM) and Anti-Ship Cruise Missile (ASCM). A trial of SLCM was conducted in February 2023 and met all the mission objectives with a range of 402km.

India has supersonic missiles in the form of BrahMos which has now capability to strike targets beyond 800kms and has achieved success in exports. Subsonic cruise missiles are also expected to be offered to friendly foreign countries after they are fully tested and are inducted in Indian defence forces. *— ANI*

India has supersonic missiles in the form of BrahMos which has capability to strike targets beyond 800km **PHOTO: ANI**

After cash-for-query, ED summons Moitra in FEMA case

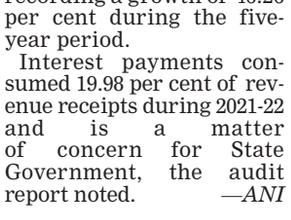
NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Enforcement Directorate on Thursday summoned Trinamool Congress leader Mahua Moitra to appear before the agency on 19 February for questioning in Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA) contravention case.

Moitra also has sent her response to a questionnaire by CBI on allegations of corruption in raising questions in house, officials said on Thursday.

CBI is examining the response after which it will send a report to anti-corruption ombudsman Lokpal which had referred the matter to the agency.

The agency is conducting a preliminary inquiry into the allegations against Moitra on the reference from Lokpal. CBI is also understood to have spoken to lawyer Jai Dehadrai and businessman Darshan Hiranandani in connection with its inquiry. BJP Lok Sabha MP Nishikant Dubey had accused Moitra of asking questions in Lok Sabha to target Adani group and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the behest of businessman Darshan Hiranandani in exchange for gifts. He had also accused Moitra of compromising national security for monetary gains. Moitra has denied any wrongdoing and claimed she was being targeted as she had raised questions on the deals of Adani group. "Neither has Lok Pal uploaded any referral order on website as per Lokpal Act & nor has CBI put out anything official. Hope Rs 13,000 crore Adani coal scam merits CBI PE before my witch hunt," Moitra said on X. *—PTI*



Mahua Moitra **PHOTO: ANI**

CAG REPORT

'Kerala missed '22 fiscal deficit target'

T'PURAM, 15 FEB

Kerala did not achieve its fiscal deficit target fixed in its Medium Term Fiscal Plan or Kerala Fiscal Responsibility Act during 2021-22, an audit report of Comptroller and Auditor General of India (C&AG) revealed on Thursday.

The fiscal deficit to state GDP ratio, which was to be anchored at 4 per cent as per Kerala Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2022, came in at 5.10 per cent during 2021-22.

The difference between total revenue and total expenditure of Government is termed as fiscal deficit. It is an indication of the total borrowings that may be needed by the Government.

The target for revenue deficit was zero. However, it increased by 14.36 per cent in 2021-22 **PHOTO: PIXABAY**

The target for revenue deficit was zero. However, it increased by 14.36 per cent in 2021-22 as compared to 2020-21 and stood at 29,539.27 crore, audit report put out by principal accountant general said.

The overall debt as a percentage of GSDP increased from 37.85 per cent in 2020-2021 to 38.01 per cent in2021-22.

State's own tax revenue, increased from 46,459.61 crore in 2017-18 to 58,340.52 crore in 2021-22.

However, as a percentage of revenue receipts, State's own tax revenue decreased from 55.96 per cent in 2017-18 to 50.02 per cent 2021-22, indicating poor collection of tax revenue during the pandemic period.

Revenue Expenditure of State increased from 99,948.35 crore in 2017-18 to 1, 46,179.51 crore in 2021-22 recording a growth of 46.26 per cent during the five-year period.

Interest payments consumed 19.98 per cent of revenue receipts during 2021-22 and is a matter of concern for State Government, the audit report noted. *—ANI*

PLEA IN HC AGAINST AXIS BANK FOR GAINS FROM EQUITY

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Former Rajya Sabha MP Subramanian Swamy moved Delhi High Court against Axis Bank and its group of companies for making undue profits/gains from the purchase and sale of equity shares of Max Life in non-transparent manner.

He also seeks direction to form a Committee consisting of experts to investigate alleged fraudulent acts of Max Life Insurance Co. Ltd and Max Financial Services Ltd in allowing their shareholder/Axis Bank Ltd and its group companies. The bench of Justice Manmohan and Justice Manmeet Pritam Singh Arora asked petitioner to serve the petition copy to all respondents and fixed the matters for 13 March, 2024. *—ANI*

PROTEST ON

Tractors pass in front of the Colosseum as farmers protest continues in Rome, Italy on Thursday. The farmers have been protesting against European Union's (EU)farming policies and to demand measures to combat production cost hikes, reduced profits and unfair competition from non-EU countries ***PHOTO: PTI***

What is happening in WB's Sandeshkhali?

Sandeshkhali, a village in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, has been at the centre of a political storm for nearly a month and has witnessed unprecedented protests over allegations of sexual abuse by scores of women against a local TMC leader.

How did it start?

It all started on a sleepy, cold morning of 5 January after a raid by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) at the residence of now absconding TMC strongman Shajahan Shiekh in Sandeshkhali in the multi-crore ration distribution scam.

Shajahan's men in the locality not only prevented the ED officers from entering his home but also assaulted them before the central probe agency's men managed to escape from the village around 74 km away from the city.After the ED incident, local women in large numbers came out in the open and alleged that Shajahan and his men forcibly grabbed their land for prawn cultivation, torturing and sexually harassing them for several years.

What are the main allegations?

"Party (TMC) men would survey every home and if there was any beautiful woman, primarily a young wife or a girl, they would take them to the party office. They will keep that woman there night after night till they are satisfied," one of the several local women, who kept her face covered to hide her identity fearing attack by Shajahan and his associates, alleged.

The women said that the absence of Shajahan has given them the courage to speak about the torture they have been undergoing for several years.Women protested with bamboo sticks, and brooms and gheraoed the local police stations demanding the immediate arrest of Shajahan, Shibaprasad Hazra.

Allegations led to protests and a political blame game:

Tension escalated last Friday when the protesting women burnt down three poultry farms owned by Hazra, which they claimed were built on a piece of land forcibly grabbed from local villagers.

Calcutta High Court said that state should deploy more security forces and there should be close monitoring through drones and CCTV cameras in Sandeshkhali ***PHOTO: PTI***

This led the Opposition parties in Bengal to escalate their demands to arrest Shajahan and his men immediately.

BJP, CP(IM), and the Congress alleged that the ruling TMC administration has been "giving protection" to Shajahan and his men while some of the TMC leaders claimed that Shajahan was wrongfully framed by the opposition parties who have joined hands keeping in mind the ensuing Lok Sabha elections.

The protests of the women forced Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose earlier this week to cut short his Kerala trip to review the situation in Sandeshkhali. Bose has also submitted a report to the Ministry of Home Affairs, blaming the law enforcers for working hand in glove with "rowdy elements" in Sandeshkhali.

Reacting to these developments, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said those who were responsible have been put behind bars. The situation was being monitored closely and necessary steps were being taken, she had said.

Banerjee's statement came on the day when Bose went to Sandeshkhali and reviewed the law and order situation there.

Police action and visits by commissions:

Police arrested former CPI(M) MLA from Sandeshkhali Nirapada Sardar, and a local BJP leader Vikas Singh over the allegations.

Barishat Police on Monday said that they have received only four complaints from the people of violence-hit Sandeshkhali but none of them mentioned any incident of rape or sexual harassment.

A team of the state Women's Commission visited Sandeshkhali on Monday, spoke to the local women, and submitted a report to the Chief Minister's Office (CMO).

The state administration has constituted a 10-member team under senior IPS officers to probe into the incidents of Sandeshkhali.

Representatives of the National Women's Commission and National Commission for Scheduled Castes tried going to Sandeshkhali have also faced hindrances from the police who cited the prohibitory orders, stating that their visits might cause a law and order problem in the area.

Protests and allegations prompted Calcutta HC to react:

Earlier this week, the Calcutta High Court revoked the imposition of Section 144 in trouble-torn Sandeshkhali saying that the state administration usually identifies disturbed areas and imposes prohibitory orders in specific zones. It also said the state should deploy more security forces and there should be close monitoring through drones and CCTV cameras.Another Calcutta High Court Judge Justice Apurba Sinha Ray on Tuesday took suo motu cognisance of the allegations of the local women being sexually harassed and tribal land forcibly taken away and instructed the state to file a report within a week. *—PTI*

SALAR سالار

Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia's next President

A wealthy ex-general with ties to both Indonesia's popular outgoing president and its dictatorial past looks set to be its next president, after unofficial tallies showed him taking a clear majority in the first round of voting.

Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto presented himself as heir to the immensely popular sitting President Joko Widodo, vowing to continue the modernisation agenda that's brought rapid growth and vaunted Indonesia into the ranks of middle-income countries.

"We should not be arrogant. We should not be proud. We should not be euphoric. We still have to be humble. This victory must be a victory for all Indonesian people," Subianto said in a speech broadcast on national television.

But Subianto will enter office with unresolved questions about the costs of extraction-driven growth for the environment and traditional communities, as well as his own links to torture, disappearances and other human rights abuses in the final years of the brutal Suharto dictatorship, which he served as a lieutenant general.

A former rival of Widodo who lost two presidential races to him, Subianto embraced the popular leader to run as his heir, even choosing Widodo's son as his running mate, a choice that ran up against constitutional age limits and has activists worried about an emerging political dynasty in the 25-year-old democracy.

Subianto's win is not yet official. His two rivals have not yet conceded and the official results could take up to a month to be tabulated, but election night "quick counts" showed him taking over 55 per cent of the vote in a three-way race. Those counts, conducted by polling agencies and based on millions of ballots sampled from the across the country, have proved accurate in past elections.Subianto was born in 1951 to one of Indonesia's most powerful families, the third of four children. His father, Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, was an influential politician, and a minister under Presidents Sukarno and Suharto.

Subianto's father first worked for Sukarno, but later turned against him and was forced into exile. Subianto spent most of his childhood overseas and speaks French, German, English and Dutch.Human rights groups have claimed that Subianto was involved in a series of human rights violations in Timor-Leste in the 1980s and 90s, when Indonesia occupied the now-independent nation. Subianto has denied those allegations.

Subianto and other members of Kopassus were banned from travelling to the US for years over the alleged human rights abuses they committed against the people of Timor-Leste. This ban lasted until 2020, when it was effectively lifted so he could visit the US as Indonesia's defence minister.In 1983, he married Suharto's daughter Siti Hediati Hariyadi.

More allegations of human rights abuses led to Subianto being forced out of the military. He was dishonorably discharged in 1998, after Kopassus soldiers kidnapped and tortured political opponents of Suharto, his then-father-in-law. Of 22 activists kidnapped that year, 13 remain missing. Several of his men were tried and convicted, but Subianto never faced trial.

He never commented on these accusations, but went into self-imposed exile in Jordan in 1998.Subianto returned from Jordan in 2008, and helped to found the Gerinda Party. He ran for the presidency twice, losing to Widodo both times. He refused to acknowledge the results at first, but accepted Widodo's offer of the defence minister position in 2019, in a bid for unity.

. Under Widodo, Indonesia has strengthened defence ties with the US while courting Chinese investment.

"Countries like us, countries as big as us, countries as rich as us, are always envied by other powers," Subianto said during his victory speech after the election. "Therefore, we must be united. United and harmonious."

The former rivals became tacit allies: Indonesian presidents don't typically endorse candidates, but Subianto chose Widodo's son, 36-year-old Surakarta Mayor Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as his vice presidential running mate, and Widodo coyly favoured Subianto over the candidate of his own former party.

Raka is below the statutory minimum age of 40, but was allowed to run under an exception created by the Constitutional Court — then headed by Widodo's brother-in-law — allowing current and former regional governors to run at age 35.

"This is the first time in Indonesian history that a sitting president has a relative who won in a presidential election," said Yoes Kenawas, a research fellow at Atma Jaya Catholic University in Jakarta.

Subianto has also had close ties with hard-line Islamists, whom he used to undermine his opponents.

But for the 2024 election, Subianto projected a softer image that has resonated with Indonesia's large youth population, including videos of him dancing on stage and ads showing digital anime-like renderings of him roller-skating through Jakarta's streets. *—AP*

Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto presented himself as heir to the sitting President Joko Widodo, vowing to continue the modernisation agenda ***PHOTO: X/ PRABOWO SUBIANTO***

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

Arwi: The lost language of the Arab-Tamils in South India

Coastal towns across southern India still reveal how medieval travellers once used the power of language to further trade and forge deep connections.

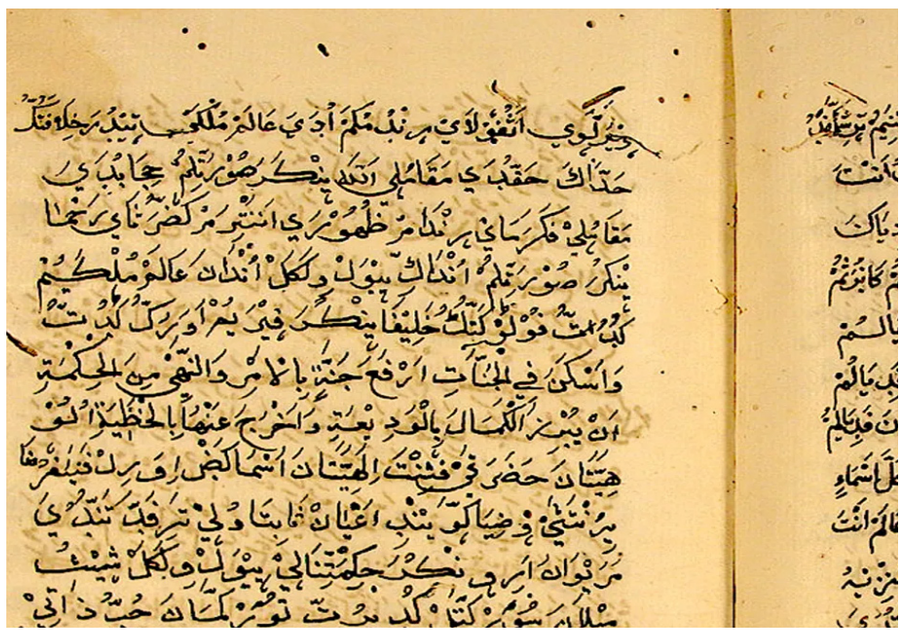
One warm summer evening in 2008, when Mohamed Sultan Baqavi was a 26-year-old student at Arabic College in the South Indian town of Vellore, he made a remarkable discovery. After offering prayers in the city's Labaabeen Qabrusthan mosque, where generations of his spiritual gurus were laid to rest, he caught sight of a man sweeping the courtyard.

The man gathered the debris – scraps of paper, rubble and leaves – and piled them up beside a dried-up well near the mosque's entrance to set alight. When he pried it from his face, Baqavi was startled to find that the scrap of paper was a part of a book. He knew that some mosques used their dried-out wells as storage for rare manuscripts, and stray pages from these often littered courtyards. Could this be one of them, he wondered?

He opened it to find pages of rare script that he immediately recognised. It was written in the long-lost language of Arwi. The Indian Ocean trade at the time was dominated by Arabian and Persian traders who landed in India before European colonialists. Travel and trade shaped how these languages evolved

"Arabic Tamil, called Arwi, was just one of the many languages that found expression in Arabic script," explained Mahmood Kooria, a lecturer in the history of the Indian Ocean world before 1750, at the University of Edinburgh. Arwi extended to nearby Sri Lanka, which had its own Tamil-speaking population too. And though the language was thought to be on the brink of extinction after the 18th Century, when European colonial powers began to dominate the Indian Ocean trade and native speakers began to dwindle, today it's facing a curious revival. University graduates are studying it, and in a handful of villages along the coast, many Muslim women pride themselves in singing prayer songs in the ancient tongue.

"Many people don't realise its value. Families in my hometown of Kayalpatnam [in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu] consider it a sacred link to their roots," Baqavi said.



Some scholars believe that Arwi's popularity during the 17th Century was due to the inter-marriage of Arab seafarers and local Tamil Muslim women ***PHOTO: AHAMED ZUBAIR/ BBC***

Kilakarai, 530km south of Tamil Nadu's capital city of Chennai, is one such town. Located on the banks of the Bay of Bengal with a population of 38,000, it is home to the Jumma Pali Masjid – one of the oldest mosques in India, built in 628 CE. The mosque was believed to have been built by Yemeni merchants and traders who had arrived by sea to these parts. Some scholars believe that Arwi's popularity during the 17th Century was due to the inter-marriage of Arab seafarers and local Tamil Muslim women, and also because it helped the traders deepen business ties – they were able to master a complex language like Tamil using the Arabic script that they were already familiar with.

"Tamil has 247 letters. Arwi had a much more manageable alphabet – just 40 letters – perfect for medieval seafarers who wanted to quickly pick up proficiency in the tongue… enough to trade and earn their livelihood in a new land," said K MA Ahamed Zubair, associate Professor of Arabic at The New College in Chennai, who teaches the Arwi script to his students.Unlike the North, where Muslims are often discriminated against, in South India, they integrated seamlessly and have lived in harmony for centuries

It wasn't just this mix of Tamil and Arabic that was compelling to traders. In the neighbouring state of Kerala, whose native language is Malayalam, Arabic Malayalam (called Arabu Malayalam or Mapilla Malayalam) flourished, too.

Other regional Indian languages such as Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi and Sindhi were written out in Arabic script as well, Zubair said. Each language was unique – born out of a fusion of Arabic and the local tongue. But Arwi continued to flourish even when Arab traders moved on from the Tamil Nadu region because of a significant Tamil-speaking population overseas, said Zubair. "As per historical records, Arwi travelled [with Arabic traders] to Sri Lanka, Sumatra, Malaysia, Singapore, East and South Africa as well."

Arabic Tamil and Arabic Malayalam were so popular because they had a rich literary and oral tradition, added Kooria. Across India and Sri Lanka, 2,000 books written in Arabic Tamil have been identified. In Kerala, researchers are trying to preserve rare Arabic Malayalam manuscripts.

However, in order to preserve the manuscripts, you first have to find them. And that has proved to be quite the challenge. Baqavi, who found the book being burnt on the premises of the mosque, says he's now collected more than 300 Arwi and Arabic Malayalam books from different parts of India and Asia. "I found these books in dried out old wells, in graveyards (called Qabarusthans) and old unused lofts in Muslim homes," he said. (Many of these texts from private collections are now being digitised and uploaded online at the Mapilla Heritage Library.

As a result of colonialism, manuscripts also found their way to the British library in London, where they are housed today. Kooria, who reads and writes Arabic Malayalam, has been assisting the British Library in cataloguing these texts for the last four years. "I was stunned to find so many on history, religion, medicine and culture; [and] many of these were written by women," he said.It's proof of how Muslim women had a strong voice and identity and were part of a matrilineal tradition. A significant number of these books by women authors were written for other women, addressing issues such as childbirth and sexuality, and reflecting on domestic issues or discussing cuisines and culture, said Ophira Gamliel, a lecturer in South Asian Religions at the University of Glasgow. "It's proof of how Muslim women had a strong voice and identity and were part of a matrilineal tradition," said Gamliel.

And while these fusion dialects are not spoken on a daily basis anymore, Arwi and Arabic Malayalam still live on today because of these books and songs.

Religious ballads composed in both Arwi and Arabic Malayalam and are still sung in Baqavi's hometown of Kayalpatnam because locals want to remember the language and keep their history alive.

—BBC News

Russia mulls putting nuclear weapon in space, says US

Joe Biden urged to declassify intelligence on the operation

WASHINGTON, 15 FEB

US intelligence shows that Russia is discussing the possibility of basing a nuclear weapon in space, according to people familiar with the matter, a finding that emerged after a top House Republican publicly warned of an unspecified national-security threat.

The threat cited by US intelligence is not yet an active one and Russia has not deployed a nuclear weapon into space, according to the people, who spoke on condition of anonymity. While the conclusions are significant and US officials are taking the matter seriously, there's no immediate cause for public alarm, said the people.

US national security advisor Jake Sullivan said he would meet Thursday with the US House contingent of the so-called Gang of Eight congressional leaders. The meeting was scheduled before House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner on Wednesday issued a cryptic public statement.

The Ohio Republican called Biden on President Joe to declassify "all information relating to this threat." Turner did not offer further details about the nature of the threat. Turner's decision to go public with the issue, without fully describing it, caused concern in Washington. The episode comes at a time when wars in Ukraine, Israel and Gaza are weighing heavily on the US.

The threat cited by US intelligence is not yet an active one and Russia has not deployed a nuclear weapon into space ***PHOTO: EPA***

- US national security advisor Jake Sullivan said he would meet Thursday with the US House contingent of the so-called Gang of Eight congressional leaders

Sullivan declined to specify the subject of Thursday's meeting or respond to Turner's characterization of the national security matter. "I'm not in a position to say anything further today," he said.

ABC News and New York Times reported earlier that Russia was considering putting a nuclear weapon in space. House Speaker Mike Johnson sought to ease fears that Americans could face imminent danger. He nonetheless told reporters he would "press the administration to take appropriate action" in the meeting with Sullivan.

Sullivan told reporters at the White House Wednesday he had proactively reached out to the Gang of Eight to set a meeting — which he described a "highly unusual" move. The four House members of that group will meet Sullivan on Thursday, he said.

—Courtesy, Bloomberg

'Russia prefers Biden as he is more predictable'

MOSCOW, 15 FEB

President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that Russia would prefer to see President Joe Biden win a second term, describing him as more experienced than Donald Trump.

Speaking in an interview with a correspondent from Russian state television, Putin declared that he will work with any US leader who is elected, but noted that he would prefer Biden's victory when asked who would be a better choice from the point of view of Russia.

"Biden, he's more experienced, more predictable, he's a politician of the old formation," Putin said. "But we will work with any US leader whom the American people trust." Putin's comments were his first about the upcoming US presidential election, likely to pit Biden against Trump, and come as tensions between Republicans and Democrats are high over Biden's attempts to send more military aid to Kyiv.

However, Trump's recent statements calling into question US funding for Ukraine and saying he wants to shake up the NATO alliance could better serve Putin. Biden accused Trump on Tuesday of having "bowed down to a Russian dictator." Asked about speculation on Biden's health issues, Putin responded that "I'm not a doctor and I don't consider it proper to comment on that."

Biden's team worked to alleviate Democratic concerns over alarms raised by a special counsel about Biden's age and memory. They came in a report determining that Biden would not be charged with any criminal activity for possessing classified documents after he left office. Putin noted that the talk about Biden's health comes as "the election campaign is gaining speed in the US, and it's taking an increasingly sharp course." *—AP*

IMMIGRANTS INCREASINGLY LEAVING CANADA

ONTARIO, 15 FEB

As per the recent study conducted by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship and the Conference Board of Canada, immigrants are increasingly departing from Canada in pursuit of "greener pastures," sparking concerns in the Great White North, Khalsa Vox reported.

According to the study's findings, the research has sparked concerns with its findings. The study revealed that approximately 17.5 per cent of immigrants who arrived during this period eventually opted to emigrate within 20 years, Khalsa Vox reported. The statistics call it "vital" to recognise that emigration rates have been steadily increasing since the 1980s.

According to the study, certain rise in outward migration exceeds the historical average by 31 per cent. These statistics have gathered the attention of people. *—ANI*

US: Indian-origin elderly motel owner shot dead

WASHINGTON, 15 FEB

A 76-year-old Indian-origin motel owner was shot dead by a customer in the US state of Alabama following an altercation over a room, the latest in a string of tragedies to shock the community in the country. Pravin Raojibhai Patel, who owned Hillcrest Motel in Sheffield, was shot dead last week According to Sheffield Police Chief Ricky Terry, William Jeremy Moore, 34, was arrested for the shooting death of Patel, WAFF TV, a television station in Huntsville, reported. Officials said the shooting was the result of an altercation that occurred when Moore came to the property looking to rent a room. Moore pulled a gun and shot Patel, Terry said. "Moore was quickly apprehended by Sheffield Police on 13th Avenue when he was trying to break into an abandoned house," the chief said. *—PTI*

N Korean President oversees test of new missiles

SEOUL, 15 FEB

North Korean President Kim Jong-un has supervised the test firing of a new surface-to-sea missile and ordered to tighten the defence posture near the western maritime border, Yonhap News Agency reported. According to the report, North Korea test-launched the new missile, Padasuri-6 on Wednesday a day after the South Korean Military said North Korea fired several cruise missiles off the eastern port of Wonsan. The missile hit a target after launch over waters in the East Sea for around 1400 seconds, or 23 minutes and 20 seconds. It did not disclose further details, such as how many missiles were fired, Yonhap News Agency reported quoting Korean Central News Agency. It marked North Korea's fifth cruise missile launch this year. *—ANI*

Aus PM announces engagement to Jodie Haydon

SYDNEY, 15 FEB

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has announced his engagement to his partner of four years, Jodie Haydon. He proposed at the Lodge - the prime minister's official Canberra residence - on Valentine's Day, with a ring he specially designed. Albanese, 60, and Ms Haydon, 45, met at a business dinner in Melbourne in 2020. He is the first Australian leader to get engaged while in office. Albanese shared the news on social media with a selfie, captioned: "She said yes." "We are thrilled and excited to share this news and look forward to spending the rest of our lives together. We are so lucky to have found each other," the pair later said in a joint statement. *—BBC News*

Zardari tipped to become Pakistan Prez

ISLAMABAD, 15 FEB

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) top leader Asif Ali Zardari is likely to be Pakistan's next president, a second term for him after his party agreed to ally with the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to form a government at the Centre, according to media reports here.

"If the situation remains unchanged, the country will see the PML-N's prime minister and the PPP's president," The News International reported on Wednesday, quoting sources amid talks of a quid pro quo arrangement between the PML-N and PPP.

After the February 8 polls produced a split mandate, there has been no government in place in the country for almost a week now.

With none of the major parties gaining a clear majority, Pakistan was staring at a coalition government.

As part of PML-N and PPP alliance, Shehbaz Sharif, the younger brother of former premier Nawaz Sharif, is expected to become Pakistan's next prime minister. The coming together of these two parties meant that the jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) would not be able to assume power despite the independent candidates it backed won the maximum number of seats in the National Assembly.

Ali Zardari ***PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA***

PPP president Zardari, 68, served as the President of Pakistan from 2008 to 2013.

The current Pakistan President Dr Arif Alvi is scheduled to relinquish his post later this month.

PML-N on Tuesday night nominated 72-year-old Shehbaz as the prime ministerial candidate instead of the party supremo and three-time former premier Nawaz Sharif.

The 74-year-old veteran politician, who was seeking a record fourth term as prime minister, returned to Pakistan in October last year after ending a self-imposed exile in the UK.

The PML-N and PPP have been joined by the MQM-P, PML-Q, IPP, and BAP to form a coalition government in the Centre on the pattern of the last government of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM). *—PTI*

2 killed, 14 injured in firing during vote recount in Pak

KARACHI, 15 FEB

At least two persons were killed and 14 others injured in an armed clash between the supporters of two political parties during a vote recount in a constituency in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province, police said on Thursday. Supporters of Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) clashed outside the office of the returning officer in the industrial town of Hub, bordering Karachi. In the elections on 8 February, BAP's Muhammad Saleh Bhootani had claimed victory after unofficial results were announced but the PPP's Ali Hassan Zehri sought a recount of votes to overturn the result. As a result, the Election Commission of Pakistan ordered a recount of votes. "The clash took place when the recounting was taking place on Wednesday with votes of 39 polling stations being recounted, and fights broke out between supporters of both candidates," SSP Hub Manzoor Ahmed Buledi told reporters. *—PTI*

Israeli airstrikes killed 10 Lebanese civilians in 1 day

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate for the strikes, which hit in the city of Nabatiyeh ***PHOTO: PTI***

BEIRUT, 15 FEB

The civilian death toll from two Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon has risen to 10, Lebanese media reported Thursday, making the previous day the deadliest one in more than four months of cross-border exchanges.

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate for the strikes, which hit in the city of Nabatiyeh and a village in southern Lebanon, just hours after projectiles from Lebanon killed an Israeli soldier.

In Nabatiyeh, the strike knocked down part of a building, killing seven members of the same family, including a child, the state-run National News Agency said.

A boy initially reported missing was found alive under the rubble. Initial reports had said four people were killed.

In the village of Souaneh, a woman and her two young children were killed. The Lebanese civilian death toll included six women and three children. Three Hezbollah fighters were also killed on Wednesday.

The fire from Lebanon earlier Wednesday struck the northern Israeli town of Safed, killing a female Israeli soldier and wounding eight people.

The fatalities marked a significant escalation in more than four months of daily cross-border exchanges triggered by the 7 October outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. The war began with the surprise attack in southern Israel by the Palestinian militant group Hamas, an ally of Hezbollah. *—AP*

ISRAELI FIRE KILLS PATIENT AND WOUNDS OTHERS: MEDICS

RAFAH, 15 FEB

Israeli forces fired into the main hospital in southern Gaza early on Thursday, killing a patient and wounding six others, according to medics, as the army sought to evacuate thousands of displaced people from the medical complex that has been largely cut off by fighting for weeks.

Negotiations over a ceasefire in Gaza appear to have stalled, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive until Hamas is destroyed and scores of hostages taken during the 7 October attack that sparked the war are returned.

Nasser Hospital, in the southern city of Khan Younis, has been the latest focus of operations that have gutted Gaza's health sector as it struggles to treat scores of patients wounded in daily bombardments. Israel accuses Hamas of using hospitals and other civilian structures to shield its fighters. *—AP*

22 INJURED

1 dead in Super Bowl parade shooting

MISSOURI, 15 FEB

Disc jockey Lisa Lopez-Galvan, a mother of two children, was killed in the shooting in Kansas City, Missouri, in the United States on Wednesday local time, the KKFI radio station confirmed as per a report in the People magazine.

The shooting occurred towards the end of a parade and celebration of the Super Bowl LVIII victory of the Kansas City Chiefs over the San Francisco 49ers on Sunday in Las Vegas. Officials said the shooting incident took place west of Union Station, near the garage, when the Chiefs fans were leaving. According to Kansas City police, two armed men have been detained.

"It is with sincere sadness and an extremely heavy and broken heart that we let our community know that KKFI DJ Lisa Lopez, host of Taste of Tejano lost her life today in the shooting at the KC Chiefs' rally," read a statement posted online by the Radio station KKFI.

Another video showed two onlookers chasing and tackling someone, holding that person down until two police officers arrived. Kansas City has long struggled with gun violence, and in 2020 it was among nine cities targeted by the US Justice Department to crack down on violent crime. In 2023 the city matched a record with 182 homicides, most of which involved guns.

Lucas, said he was heartbroken and angry. "This is absolutely a tragedy, the likes of which we never would have expected in Kansas City, the likes of which we'll remember for some time," Lucas said. *—ANI/ AP*

3 officers shot at in Washington

WASHINGTON, 15 FEB

Three police officers were shot trying to make an animal cruelty arrest that touched off an hours-long standoff in the nation's capitol on Wednesday, which ended late at night with a man's arrest.

The officers were hospitalised and expected to recover from gunshot wounds, authorities said. A fourth officer was hurt at the scene, but not shot.

The standoff started Wednesday morning as officers attempted to make an arrest on an animal cruelty warrant, but the suspect refused to leave the home, Metropolitan Police Department Chief Pamela Smith said. As officers tried to get inside, a person opened fire.

The shooter barricaded himself inside his home in the southeast part of Washington and continued sporadically firing shots hours after opening fire, police said.

Hours after the standoff began, 46-year-old Julius James was arrested on suspicion of cruelty to animals. One officer was struck by gunfire twice, but the rounds were stopped by a bulletproof vest, said Gregg Pemberton, chairman of the Washington, DC, police union.

Two more officers were struck in their lower legs. The fourth officer suffered hand injuries at the scene, he said.

Roads were closed, schools were locked down and police warned people to stay far from the area as the shooting unfolded. *—AP*

- The officers were hospitalised and expected to recover from gunshot wounds, authorities said. A fourth officer was hurt at the scene, but not shot

US court appears torn on tossing Harvey Weinstein's 2020 rape conviction

NEW YORK, 15 FEB

Nearly four years after Harvey Weinstein was convicted of rape and sent to prison, New York's highest court appeared torn at oral arguments Wednesday about potentially overturning the landmark #MeToo era verdict.

Weinstein's lawyers urged the state's Court of Appeals to dismiss the disgraced movie mogul's 2020 conviction, arguing that the trial judge, James Burke, trampled his right to a fair trial with pro-prosecution rulings that turned the trial into "1-800-GET-HARVEY".

"It was his character that was on trial.

It wasn't the evidence that was on trial," Weinstein's lawyer Arthur Aidala told the seven-member court in Albany.

Weinstein, 71, was convicted of a criminal sex act for forcibly performing oral sex on a TV and film production assistant in 2006 and rape in the third degree for an attack on an aspiring actress in 2013. He was sentenced to 23 years in prison.

Last year, he was convicted in Los Angeles of another rape and sentenced to an additional 16 years in prison.

A lawyer for the Manhattan district attorney's office, which prosecuted Weinstein's New York case, told the appeals court that Burke's rulings were proper and the conviction should stand.

Weinstein's lawyers want a new trial, but only for the criminal sexual act charge. They argue the rape charge can't be retried because it involves alleged conduct outside the statute of limitations.

Reversing the verdict would reopen a painful chapter in America's reckoning with sexual misconduct by powerful figures. The court is unlikely to rule immediately. *—AP*

ASSANGE INDICTMENT

Australia wants WikiLeaks founder back home

MELBOURNE, 15 FEB

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said Thursday he hoped for an amicable end to the prosecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange after lawmakers ramped up pressure on the United States and Britain by passing a motion calling for the Australian citizen to be allowed to return to his home country.

Albanese told Parliament the days before Britain's High Court of Justice hears Assange's appeal next week against extradition to the United States on espionage charges were a "critical period."

"I hope this can be resolved. I hope it can be resolved amicably. It's not up to Australia to interfere in the legal processes of other countries, but it is appropriate for us to put our very strong view that those countries need to take into account the need for this to be concluded," Albanese said.

"Regardless of where people stand, this thing cannot just go on and on and on indefinitely," Albanese added.

Albanese congratulated independent lawmaker Andrew Wilkie for moving a motion in support of Assange in the House of Representatives on Wednesday ahead of the appeal.

Albanese was among the 86 lawmakers who voted for the motion that called on the United States and Britain to bring the "matter to a close so that Assange can return home to his family in Australia."

Albanese congratulated independent lawmaker Andrew Wilkie for moving a motion in support of Assange in the House ***PHOTO: AP***

The motion was opposed by 42 lawmakers including most of the main Opposition party that unsuccessfully proposed amendments.

- Albanese congratulated independent lawmaker Andrew Wilkie for moving a motion in support of Assange in the House of Representatives on Wednesday ahead of the appeal. Albanese was among the 86 lawmakers who voted for the motion that called on the US

Leaders of both the government and the Opposition have publicly stated that the United States' pursuit of the 52-year-old had dragged on for too long. *—AP*

Indian national gets to 51 months jail in US

WASHINGTON, 15 FEB

A 24-year-old Indian national has been sentenced by a US court to 51 months in jail for defrauding an elderly American woman of USD 1,50,000 through a computer-hacking scheme, a US Attorney said.

The defendant, Sukhdev Vaid of Haryana, pleaded guilty in December 2023 to wire fraud. He defrauded the woman through an international computer-hacking scheme that targeted elderly Americans nationwide and resulted in more than USD 1.2 million in total losses, US Attorney Jesse Laslovich said. The court ordered on Wednesday that upon release from custody, Vaid would be remanded to the Bureau of Customs and Immigration Enforcement for deportation and ordered Vaid to pay USD 1,236,470 restitution.

"It has become all too common for people outside of our country to victimise Montanans, especially as it relates to wire fraud, and get away with it. But not this time. Vaid is going to federal prison due to the sophistication and tenacity of the FBI, for which I am grateful," Laslovich said.

Flathead County Sheriff Brian Heino said that these scams occur frequently and can be devastating. "I urge everyone to exercise caution; do not allow strangers access to your computer, bank accounts, or personal information," he said. *—PTI*

Japan slips to world's fourth-largest economy

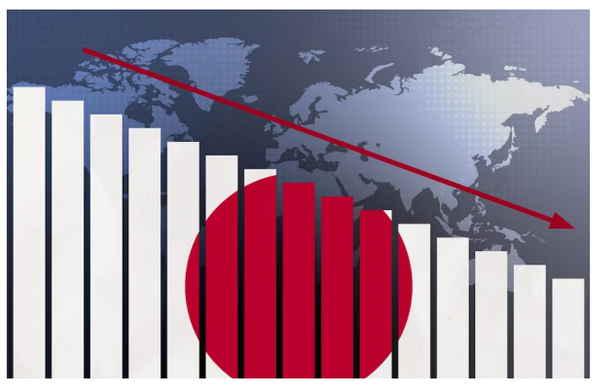
As per the data, Japan is now behind Germany

TOKYO, 15 FEB

Japan's economy is now the world's fourth-largest after it contracted in the last quarter of 2023 and fell behind Germany.

The government reported the economy shrank at an annual rate of 0.4 per cent in October to December, according to Cabinet Office data on real GDP, though it grew 1.9per cent for all of 2023. It contracted 2.9per cent in July-September. Two straight quarters of contraction are considered an indicator an economy is in a technical recession.

A weaker Japanese yen was a key factor in the drop to fourth place, since comparisons of nominal GDP are in dollar terms. But Japan's relative weakness also reflects a decline in its population and lagging productivity and competitiveness, economists say.



Japanese economy is powered by strong small and medium-size businesses with solid productivity **PHOTO: FREEPIK**

Real gross domestic product is a measure of the value of a nation's products and services. The annual rate measures what would have happened if the quarterly rate lasted a year.

Both the Japanese and German economies are powered by strong small and medium-size businesses with solid productivity.

But its economy, one of the world's worst performing last year, also contracted in the last quarter, by 0.3per cent.

The latest data reflect the realities of a weakening Japan and will likely result in Japan's commanding a lesser presence in the world, said Tetsuji Okazaki, professor of economics at the University of Tokyo.

The gap between developed countries and emerging nations is shrinking, with India likely to overtake Japan in nominal GDP in a few years.

Another key factor behind Japan's sluggish growth is stagnating wages that have left households reluctant to spend. At the same time, businesses have been invested heavily in faster growing economies overseas instead of in the aging and shrinking home market. *—PTI*

UK fell into recession at the end of 2023

Data deal a blow to the govt ahead of general election

LONDON, 15 FEB

The British economy fell into recession at the end of 2023 as output shrank more than anticipated in the final three months of the year, official figures showed Thursday.

The Office for National Statistics estimated that economic activity, as measured by gross domestic product, declined by 0.3 per cent in the fourth quarter of the year from the previous three-month period, with all three main sectors — services, industrial production and construction — down.

That was far more than the 0.1 per cent decline anticipated by economists. The quarterly decline followed a 0.1 per cent fall in the previous three-month period and highlights how the economy has been hobbled by high interest rates that have been raised to reduce inflation.

The hope is that the Bank of England will soon start cutting interest rates as inflation falls back toward its 2% target **PHOTO: FREEPIK**

A recession is officially defined as two straight quarters of economic decline. It is the first time the British economy has fallen into recession since the first half of 2020, when output dived during the coronavirus pandemic.

The figures deal a blow to the governing Conservative Party ahead of a general election this year, the date of which will be determined by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. Being in recession is hardly the ideal backdrop for a party that is heavily trailing the main opposition Labour Party in opinion polls.

The hope is that the Bank of England will soon start cutting interest rates as inflation falls back toward its 2 per cent target. Inflation currently stands at 4 per cent. Though interest rates appear to have peaked, the central bank has expressed caution about cutting interest rates too soon as lower borrowing rates may bolster spending and put renewed upward pressure on prices. *—PTI*

Rupee falls 2 paise to close at 83.04 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 15 FEB

The rupee consolidated in a narrow range and depreciated by 2 paise to close at 83.04 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, tracking a strong American currency and elevated crude oil prices in the international market.Forex traders said the Indian currency depreciated as foreign fund outflows weighed on the rupee. However, positive domestic markets cushioned the downside. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.00 and finally settled at 83.04 (provisional) against the dollar, down by 2 paise from its previous close. During the day, the rupee witnessed a range-bound movement. It saw an intraday high of 82.99 and a low of 83.04 against the American currency. On Wednesday, the rupee appreciated 6 paise to close at 83.02 against the US dollar. *—PTI*

Gold slips ₹80; silver rallies ₹600

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Gold prices slipped Rs 80 to Rs 62,270 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid a fall in precious metal's prices in the global markets, according to HDFC Securities.The yellow metal had ended at Rs 62,350 per 10 grams in the previous trade.However, silver rallied Rs 600 to Rs 74,600 per kilogram, while it had closed at Rs 74,000 per kg in the previous close."Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 62,270 per 10 grams, down by Rs 80, taking bearish cues from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 1,993 per ounce, down by USD 2 from the previous close. *—PTI*

Mahindra shares climb 7per cent after robust Q3 earnings

MUMBAI, 15 FEB

Shares of Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M) climbed 7 per cent on Thursday a day after the auto major reported a 34 per cent increase in its profit for the third quarter ended December. The scrip of the company rallied 6.98 per cent to Rs 1,772.75 apiece on the NSE.Mahindra & Mahindra stock zoomed 6.84 per cent to Rs 1,771 per piece on the BSE. The stock also hit a 52-week high of Rs 1,777.75 and Rs 1,777 apiece on the NSE and BSE, respectively.In the mid-session trade on Thursday, the 30-share BSE Sensex rose 25.18 points or 0.04 per cent to 71,848.01 points, while NSE Nifty gained 0.13 per cent to 21,868.30 points. In a regulatory filing on Wednesday, Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M) reported a 34 per cent increase in its consolidated profit after tax (PAT) at Rs 2,658 crore for the third quarter ended 31 December,2023*—PTI*

ED questions senior Paytm executives

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Enforcement Directorate (ED) has questioned senior Paytm executives and taken submission of documents from them following the recent RBI action of barring Paytm Payments Bank Ltd from accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer account, official sources said Thursday.

ED is conducting preliminary examination of documents before it decides to launch a formal investigation into the RBI-flagged alleged irregularities at the fintech company under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA).

Some documents have been recently submitted by Paytm executives following which they were asked certain questions. Some more information has been sought, the sources said.

As of now, no irregularities have been detected and a case under FEMA will only be registered once any contravention under the said law is found, they added.

An investigation under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) involving Paytm is already going on for some time, they said.

Paytm said its associate

PHOTO: PTI

Paytm Payments Bank Limited does not undertake outward foreign remittances.

"One 97 Communi cations Limited (OCL), its subsidiaries and its associate, Paytm Payments Bank Limited, have over time been receiving notices and requisition for information, documents and explanations from the authorities, including Enforcement Directorate (ED), with respect to the customers that may have done business with the respective entities, and provided the required information, documents and explanations to the authorities," Paytm said in a regulatory filing.Earlier this month, ED and the Financial Intelligence Unit asked the RBI to share its report on the recent action taken to bar Paytm Payments Bank Ltd from accepting deposits or top-ups in customer accounts, according to sources *—PTI*

HDFC, SBI GAIN

Sensex up 228 points, Nifty above 21,900

MUMBAI, 15 FEB

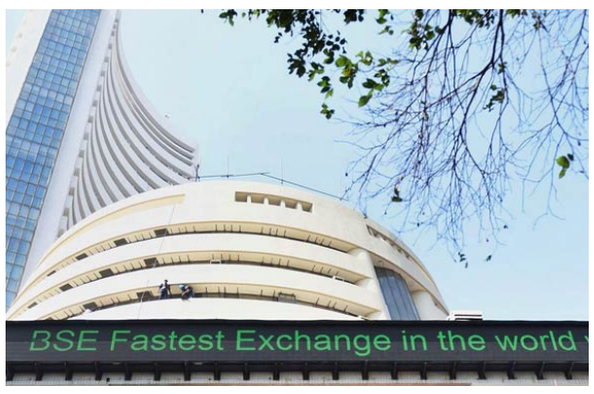
Equity benchmark Sensex climbed over 228 points to reclaim the 72,000-mark on Thursday, while the Nifty settled close to the 22,100 level, supported by hectic buying in market heavyweights M&M, HDFC Bank and SBI amid a largely firm trend in global equities.

Besides, a heavy rush on auto, energy and utility counters also helped the indices, traders said.

Rising for the third straight session, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 227.55 points or 0.32 per cent to close at 72,050.38. The index opened strong and touched a high of 72,164.97 and a low of 71,644.44 during intra-day trades.

Shares of HDFC Bank surged 2.15 per cent to close at Rs 1,413.75 apiece against its previous close.

The broader NSE Nifty also gained 70.70 points or 0.32 per cent to end at 21,910.75. "The benchmark indexes inched higher, mirroring the positive sentiment prevailing in the global market. The disinfation trend in the Euro zone, coupled with better earnings, lifted investor sentiment.



Shares of HDFC Bank surged 2.15 per cent to close at Rs 1,413.75 a piece against its previous close **PHOTO: PTI**

"Despite the broad-based recovery, market participants are more inclined towards quality large-cap stocks owing to the prevailing valuation gap, which led them to exercise caution on small and mid-caps," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

M&M was the biggest gainer in the Sensex chart, rising 6.51 per cent, followed by NTPC, PowerGrid, SBI, HDFC Bank, Asian Paints and Wipro.

In contrast, Axis Bank, ITC, HUL, Nestle India and Sun Pharma were among the laggards.

In Asia, Japan's Nikkei and Hong Kong's Hang Seng settled with gains, while South Korea's Kospi slipped into the red. China's financial markets are closed for the Lunar New Year holidays. European markets were trading on a positive note in early deals.

The US market settled with gains in the overnight trade on Wednesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude slipped 0.09 per cent to USD 81.53 a barrel. *—PTI*

RBI, Nepal's central bank ink deal on UPI

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

The Reserve Bank of India and Nepal Rastra Bank on February 15 signed and exchanged terms of reference for the integration of fast payment systems of India and Nepal through the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) of India and the National Payments Interface (NPI) of Nepal.

The RBI said in a press statement that the integration aims to facilitate cross-border remittances between India and Nepal by enabling users of the two systems to make instant, low-cost fund transfers.

"The collaboration between India and Nepal in linking their fast payment systems through the UPI-NPI linkage will further deepen financial connectivity and reinforce the enduring historical, cultural, and economic ties between the two countries," the RBI press statement read.

The Indian central bank further said that based on the terms of reference exchanged between RBI and NRB, necessary systems will be put in place for the interlinking of UPI and NPI.

"The formal launch of the linkage, that is the commencement of operations, will be done at a later date," the RBI statement added.

Earlier, on February 12, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) was launched in Sri Lanka and Mauritius adding to the growing list of countries where the payments system is either acceptable or linked to their own fast-payments network. *—PTI*

National Coal Index declines 4.75% in Dec

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

- It considers prices of coking and non-coking coal of various grades transacted in the regulated (power and fertiliser) and non-regulated sectors

Indicating sufficient coal availability in the market, the National Coal Index (NCI) declined 4.75 per cent in December.

The NCI was at 155.44 points in December 2022, the coal ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

This decline shows a strong supply of coal in the market, with sufficient availability to meet the rising demand. NCI is a price index that combines coal prices from all sales channels, including auction and import prices.

It considers prices of coking and non-coking coal of various grades transacted in the regulated (power and fertiliser) and non-regulated sectors.

"The National Coal Index (Provisional) has shown a significant decline of 4.75 per cent in December 2023 at 155.44 points compared to December 2022, where it was at 163.19 points," the coal ministry said in a statement.

"The downward trajectory of the NCI signifies a more equitable market, harmonising supply, and demand dynamics. With sufficient coal availability, the nation cannot only address burgeoning demands but also underpin its long-term energy requisites, thereby fortifying a more resilient and sustainable coal industry and fostering a prosperous future for the nation," the ministry said. *—PTI*

Imposing carbon tax unfair: CEA

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran on Thursday said measures like the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), taken by developed nations to combat climate change, are unfair towards developing economies.

The European Union has decided to impose carbon tax (CBAM) on products from certain sectors like steel, cement from countries like India and China.

The carbon tax will come into effect from 1 January , 2026. During the trial period, which started on 1 October, 2023, companies from seven carbon-intensive sectors, including steel, cement, fertiliser, aluminium and hydrocarbon products, have to share emissions data with the EU.

"By taking actions against climate change, developing countries are also ensuring lives and properties of the people and businesses in the developed world...if so, what is the premium they are getting in return for taking action on their part to ensure the economic activity in the developed world?" Nageswaran wondered.

"Obviously, the kind of premium that the developed world is contemplating paying to the developing world cannot be Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. It has to be something more positive than that," he said at the Regional Workshop on Climate Finance organised jointly by Department of Economic Affairs and Asian Development Bank.

The carbon tax by the EU may affect the profitability of Indian exporters as Europe is among the top import destinations for India.

The country's total trade with the EU was USD 134.71 billion in 2022-23, with imports worth USD 59.87 billion and exports at USD 74.84 billion. *—PTI*

'Recurring food price doesn't tackle inflation'

MUMBAI, 15 FEB

Reserve Bank Governor Shaktikanta Das on Thursday said recurring food price shocks and renewed flash points on the geo-political front pose challenges in tackling inflation.

"We remain vigilant to navigate through the last mile of disinflation as it is often the most difficult part of the journey. We firmly recognise that stable and low inflation will provide the necessary bedrock for sustainable economic growth," the governor said.

Das stressed that stable and low inflation will provide the necessary bedrock for sustainable economic growth.India has successfully navigated through multiple challenges and emerged as the fastest-growing large economy, he said in his keynote address at the 59th SEACEN Governors' Conference here.

The retail inflation, which the RBI mainly factors in while arriving at its bi-monthly monetary policy, is inching towards its target of 4 per cent, with the January imprint at 5.1 per cent. *—PTI*

'Halt trans-shipment of cargo from B'desh'

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Apparel exporters body AEPC on Thursday urged the government to suspend an order which allows the trans-shipment of Bangladesh export cargo to third countries through the Delhi Air Cargo complex. The Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEPC) has sent a communication to the Central Board of Excise and Customs (CBIC) in this regard.

It said that the Red Sea crisis has already increased transportation costs of domestic exporters and it has led to a shift of export shipments from sea to air mode.

At this crucial time, allowing Bangladeshi export cargo from Delhi Air Cargo Terminal will further increase the

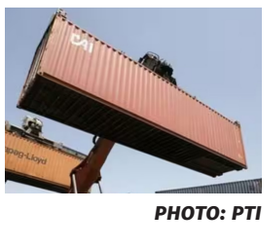


PHOTO: PTI

logistical challenges and increase the transportation cost for apparel exporters, it added.

.This has led to an excessive increase in air freight rates, delay in handling and processing of export cargo, and severe congestion at the Cargo Terminal at the IGI Airport, Delhi, resulting in exports of Indian apparel exports through the Delhi air cargo complex becoming uncompetitive, Sekhri added. *—PTI*

100 HOTELS SHORTLISTED

OYO forays into sports hospitality biz

GURGAON, 15 FEB

Hospitality and travel-tech firm OYO on Thursday announced its foray into sports hospitality business shortlisting 100 hotels across 12 key cities to cater to large sports events.

The sports hospitality business aims to meet the unique needs of large sports events with a focus on providing end-to-end solutions, including providing accommodation to athletes and sports officials participating in various sports events, the company said in a statement.

Under the vertical, a wide array of accommodation options, ranging from budget-friendly to premium hotels, will be offered to ensure a comfortable and convenient stay to participants and attendees throughout the event, it added.

It said it has identified 100 hotels in different categories across 12 cities **PHOTO: PTI**

"The launch of our sports event management unit aligns with OYO's commitment to continuous innovation and customer-centric solutions. With a focus on delivering quality hospitality, OYO plans to offer athletes a conducive and comfortable environment, ensuring they can fully concentrate on their training and competitions," OYO Head, Government and Sports Hospitality Business, Pankaj Kumar said.

It said it has identified 100 hotels in different categories across 12 cities, including Delhi, Chennai, Bengaluru, Pune, Lucknow, Jaipur, Chandigarh, and Bhopal for the accommodation of athletes and sports officials.

Specialised packages and group booking options will be available to accommodate the unique needs of sports teams and large groups, it added.

OYO said it will engage with third-party agencies for catering to a diverse range of food options to suit the preferences and dietary requirements of athletes and attendees, and also transportation-related services.Besides, it will also set up control rooms across all sports event venues to ensure seamless coordination and 24x7 emergency assistance. *—PTI*

Nikhil Joshi is new MD of Boeing Defence India

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

US aerospace major Boeing on Thursday announced the appointment of Nikhil Joshi as managing director of Boeing Defence India (BDI), saying it is aimed at strengthening the company's operations and accelerated growth strategy in the country.

Based in New Delhi, Joshi will lead current and future programmes for BDI to enhance the mission readiness and modernisation of India's defence forces, the company said.

Joshi has more than 25 years of aerospace and defence industry experience, including over two decades of service with the Indian armed forces in the aviation branch of the Indian Navy. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

CR7 claims another milestone, plays 1000th club match

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

Portuguese football legend Cristiano Ronaldo on Wednesday reached another milestone of playing the 1000th club match after taking part in Al Nassr's game against Al Fayha in the AFC Champions League (ACL). The five-time Ballon d'Or winner scored a late-minute winner to help Al Nassr clinch crucial three points against Al Fayha in the ongoing ACL. In the 81st minute of the game, Ronaldo placed a right-footed shot from the centre of the box to the top right corner. The 39-year-old has scored 746 goals after appearing in 1000 club games. Cristiano had a stupendous 2023 as he ended the year after becoming the world's top goal-scorer. In 2023, the five-time Ballon d'Or winner scored 54 goals for his country and his current club, Al Nassr. English striker Harry Kane stood in second place with 52 for his country and newly joined club Bayern Munich. *—ANI*

Nadal pulls out of Qatar Open amid more health concerns

DOHA, 15 FEB

Rafael Nadal put off his return to the tennis tour because he isn't yet healthy enough to play, announcing Wednesday that he will sit out next week's Qatar Open. "I would have loved to play in Doha, where the tournament team, as well as the amazing Qatar fans have always supported me greatly. Unfortunately I am not ready to compete and I won't be able to come to Doha where I really wanted to be and play again after that unforgettable win in 2014," Nadal wrote on social media. "I will focus on keep working to be ready for the exhibition in Las Vegas and the amazing Indian Wells tournament." The 37-year-old Spaniard is scheduled to participate in an exhibition match with Carlos Alcaraz on March 3, then head to Indian Wells, California, for the hard-court tournament there next month. *—AP*

Wawrinka loses to Jarry at Argentina Open

BUENOS AIRES, 15 FEB

Three-time major winner Stan Wawrinka was broken while serving for the match and lost 6-7 (3), 6-2, 7-6 (5) to third-seeded Nicolás Jarry on Wednesday in the round of 16 at the Argentina Open. The 38-year-old Wawrinka, who is ranked No. 60, was up a break in the third set and had a chance to serve it out in the 10th game but Jarry rallied and won the almost three-hour match in a tiebreaker. Jarry will face Tomás Martin Etcheverry in the quarterfinals of the clay court tournament in Buenos Aires. Etcheverry beat Colombia's Daniel Galán 6-3, 6-0. Defending champion and top-seeded Carlos Alcaraz will face home crowd favorite Camilo Carabelli on Thursday. *—AP*

Gangjee takes 2-shot lead in PGTI Players C'ship

KOLKATA, 15 FEB

Bengaluru-based Rahil Gangjee struck the day's joint lowest score of six-under 64 in the third round to storm into a two-shot lead at the Rs 1 crore TATA Steel PGTI Players Championship here on Thursday. Gangjee (65-65-64) produced a second straight bogey-free round to move up one spot from his overnight tied second spot with a total of 16-under 194. Manu Gandas (65-67-64), the 2022 PGTI Ranking champion, overnight leader Arjun Prasad (62-65-69) and Saptak Talwar (66-65-65) were tied for second place at 14-under 196. Gangjee hit a couple of extraordinary tee shots on the second and eighth, both par-3s, to set up short birdie putts. Gangjee, who grew up playing a lot of his golf at the Tollygunge Club here, played some good wedge shots on the back-nine to pocket three more birdies. *—PTI*

ROHIT, JADDU MAKE IT INDIA'S DAY

Day 1: India reached 326 for five wickets at stumps on the third Test against England

RAJKOT, 15 FEB

Rohit Sharma and Ravindra Jadeja made classical Test match hundreds while debutant Sarfaraz Khan announced his arrival on the big stage with a fluent half-century as India reached 326 for five at stumps on day one of the third Test against England here on Thursday.

With India reduced to 33 for three inside the first hour of play, Rohit (131 off 196) and Jadeja (110 batting off 212) steered the ship through choppy waters with a 204-run partnership. After the pair was separated, Sarfaraz (62 off 66) scored the joint fastest fifty by an Indian on debut to push India past the 300-run mark. Jadeja was batting with nightwatchman Kuldeep Yadav (1 batting) at close of play. In batting friendly conditions, the home team will be looking get near the 500-run mark on day two.

For England, fast bowler Mark Wood (3/69) vindicated his selection as England's second pacer with a two-wicket burst in the morning, accounting for Yashasvi Jaiswal (10) and Shubman Gill (0), while spinner Tom Hartley (1/81) got the better of Rajat Patidar (5) to leave India tottering.

Jaiswal was caught in the slips by Joe Root while Gill looked susceptible against the moving ball. After beating Gill on the inside edge, Wood found an outside edge to send back India's No 3 for a nine-ball duck.

> **Runs and performances were not on my mind as much as I was happy playing for India in front of my father**
>
> -Sarfaraz Khan, Indian Cricketer

Patidar was outdone by a ball from Hartley that neither spun sharply nor bounced unevenly but seemed to have slowed off the surface. Patidar was unable to control his shot as the ball simply ballooned towards short cover for a regulation catch. The pressure on the Indian camp was palpable and the team management opted for a safer route by holding Sarfaraz back and promote Jadeja at No 5 — a spot where he has batted at in only five out of his 70 Tests yet.

What transpired after the first hour calmed all the nerves in the dressing room as senior pros Rohit and Jadeja recorded only the third double-century partnership for India against England in 135 Tests. *—PTI*

Rohit Sharma celebrates his century on the first day; Dhruv Jurel and Sarfaraz Khan pose for a photograph after receiving the debut Test cap; Sarfaraz Khan hugs his father Naushad Khan after receiving his debut Test cap; India's batter Ravindra Jadeja celebrates his century **PHOTO: PTI**

SCORE	PLAYERS	BEST SHOW
326/5	RAVINDRA JADEJA	110* (212)
86 OVERS	SARFARAZ KHAN	62 (66)
	MARK WOOD	3/69

Rohit becomes India's 4th-highest run-maker

RAJKOT, 15 FEB

Indian skipper Rohit Sharma on Thursday overtook former skipper Saurav Ganguly to become the fourth-highest run-maker in international cricket. Rohit accomplished this feat against England in the fourth Test at Rajkot. In the match, Rohit scored his 11th Test ton, a knock of 131 runs in 196 balls, with 14 fours and three sixes. His runs came at a strike rate of 66.83. Now in 470 international matches, Rohit has scored 18,641 runs at an average of 43.35. He has also scored 47 centuries and 100 fifties for India, with the best score of 264. Above him are the stars like Sachin Tendulkar (34,357 runs), Virat Kohli (26,733 runs) and Rahul Dravid (24,064 runs). In 57 Tests, Rohit has scored 3,958 runs at an average of 45.49, with 11 centuries and 16 fifties. His best score is 212. *—ANI*

'Sarfaraz showed a lot of courage to play like that'

RAJKOT, 15 FEB

England assistant coach Paul Collingwood on Thursday heaped praise on debutant Sarfaraz Khan, whose aggressive 62 allowed India to score 326 for five on day one of the third Test. Collingwood said Sarfaraz showed a "lot of courage to play like that" after the right-handed batter smashed his fifty off 48 balls, the joint fastest by an Indian on debut. "He came out and batted really well. We kept attacking fields to him. He likes to be a strokemaker and play his shots," Collingwood told the media after stumps here. "I thought Ben (Stokes) wanted to keep attacking fields so we could create a chance. And fairplay to him (Sarfaraz), he had the courage to go over the top on a few occasions," Collingwood added. Collingwood said though England exploited the early conditions well, it was a toil for the remainder of the day as the ball went soft and the pitch did not have much for the bowlers. *—PTI*

ISL 2023-24

Punjab FC did everything save scoring a goal and gradually disintegrated in a 4-0 drubbing to Jamshedpur FC in the Indian Super League on Thursday in New Delhi **PHOTO: PTI**

PCB terminates Haris Rauf's central contract

LAHORE, 15 FEB

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Thursday terminated the central contract of fast bowler Haris Rauf in a disciplinary action for pulling out of the recent Test series in Australia.

The PCB also announced that Haris will not be granted No Objection Certificate (NOC) to play in any foreign league up to 30 June, 2024. "Fast bowler Haris Rauf has been penalised by Pakistan Cricket Board, following a probe into his refusal to join Pakistan's Test squad for the tour of Australia 2023-24," the PCB said in a statement.

"After a thorough hearing process conducted by a PCB committee and taking into consideration the views of all stakeholders involved in the matter, Haris' central contract has been terminated from 1 December, 2023 and no NOC (No objection certificate) to play any foreign league will be granted up to 30 June, 2024." PCB said its management provided Haris a chance for a personal hearing in compliance with the principles of natural justice on 30 January and his response was found unsatisfactory. "Refusal to be part of Pakistan's Test squad in the absence of any medical report or justifiable reason is a material violation of the central contract," the Board said.

Players with central contracts in category B like Haris get paid a monthly salary of around 4.6 million, besides match fees, allowances and other eligible bonuses. *—PTI*

WORST IN SEVEN YEARS

This was India's worst ranking after it was placed at 129th spot in January 2017 chart **PHOTO: X/IFT**

FIFA Rankings: India drops 15 places to 117th

NEW DELHI, 15 FEB

- The main movers were the countries of Asia and Africa as they had their continental championships during this period. There was no change in the top-10 with world champion Argentina still leading the pack

The Indian football team on Thursday dropped 15 places to 117th in the FIFA rankings, the worst in seven years, after the recent debacle in the AFC Asian Cup, where it lost all its three group matches.

This was India's worst ranking after it was placed at 129th spot in January 2017 chart. The historical worst ranking, though, was 173 in 2015. The Indian team was placed at 102nd in the last FIFA rankings, issued on December 21, 2023.

India also lost 35.63 rating points from the previous total. It now lies in between Togo (116th) and Guinea-Bissau (118th). The country is ranked 22nd among the Asian nations.

India, under Igor Stimac, ended their Asian Cup campaign in January pointless and goal-less after losing to Australia (0-2), Uzbekistan (0-3) and Syria (0-1). It finished at the bottom of the four-team Group B. The main movers were the countries of Asia and Africa as they had their continental championships during this period. There was no change in the top-10 with world champion Argentina still leading the pack.

France, England, Belgium and Brazil follow Argentina in that order. Asian Cup champions Qatar rose 21 places to 37th, though Japan, which dropped one spot to 18th, still leads the continental rankings. Surprise Asian Cup runners up Jordan gained 17 places to occupy 70th spot. *—PTI*

Indian Open 2024: Over 700 participated

MUMBAI, 15 FEB

The recently concluded Indian Open 2024, an international pickleball tournament, witnessed an astonishing participation of over 700 athletes from across 12 countries, predominantly from America, Europe, Kenya in what was deemed the biggest Pickleball event in India at NSCI, Mumbai.

The high level of competition that was on display for the three days was also witnessed and commended by Sania Mirza and Rohan Bopanna who were special guests at the event.

"Thank you, Global Sports, for inviting me and I think sport in India is something that needs all our support and any sport that is new needs our support and I am always there for the push. I wish everyone the best of luck over the new few days of exciting Pickleball competition," said Sania Mirza, India Tennis Legend at the event.

"First of all, it is wonderful to be at the Indian Open 2024 and I see such an amazing response to the sport of Pickleball.

This is the first time I've been in a Pickleball court and I am excited to be here, it is truly an amazing sport in the country and definitely needs all our support. It has the potential to be a big sport in India and I look forward to that." said, Rohan Bopanna, World No 1, ATP, Men's Doubles. *—ANI*

India can tame Sweden on clay in Davis Cup: Ramkumar

BENGALURU, 15

Ramkumar Ramanathan says Indian Davis Cup team is well-equipped to tackle the challenge of Sweden even if the hosts choose to play on clay courts in the September tie.

Indian team will travel to Sweden, hoping to get its first win over the European nation in the sixth clash between the two sides. Ramkumar said their familiarity with the game style of Sweden players will also stand them in good stead.

India qualified for the World Group after beating Pakistan 4-0 recently in the playoffs held in Islamabad.

"I am sure they are going to play on clay. But we have been playing some unbelievable tennis and then there is Sumit Nagal, and I think he can grind them off, and I am sure he is very fit too," Ramkumar told media here during the felicitation ceremony of Davis Cup players organised by the KSLTA.

Ramkumar **PHOTO: PTI**

- The function was also attended by N Sriram Balaji, Saketh Myneni, Nikki Poonacha and Sunil Yajaman, the joint secretary of KSLTA

"Rankings don't matter on court because it comes down to how well we play on that particular day. You have seen how Aisam (ul-Haq Qureshi of Pakistan) performed (in the Davis Cup), right?

The function was also attended by N Sriram Balaji, Saketh Myneni, Nikki Poonacha and Sunil Yajaman, the joint secretary of KSLTA.

Ramkumar also hoped to polish his singles skills further ahead of the Sweden tie. "Sweden is a great team and they have some very good players like Elias (Ymer, a world No 160). *—PTI*

BADMINTON ASIA TEAM C'SHIPS

India go down 2-3 against China

SELANGOR, 15 FEB

The Indian men's badminton team put up a spirited performance against China but ended on the losing side with a 2-3 scoreline in the Group A clash of the Badminton Asia Team Championship at Selangor, Malaysia, on Thursday.

With the quarterfinal spot assured after their win over Hong Kong on Wednesday, India opted to rest the Asian Games gold medallist doubles combination of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty and former world no 1 Kidambi Srikanth to keep them fresh for the knock-out stage.

Even after trailing by 13-19 in the decider, the Indian pair won six straight points **PHOTO: PTI**

World No 7 HS Prannoy needed time to find his footing in the opening match against Weng Hong Yang but showed why he is considered such a formidable force in the team events as he staged an impressive fightback to win 6-21, 21-18, 21-19 in an hour and 13 minutes. The doubles combination of MR Arjun and Dhruv Kapila then came close to doubling India's lead against the Chinese combination of Chen Bo Yang and Liu Yi, ranked 17 places above them. Trailing 13-19 in the decider, the Indian pair won six straight points to level scores but could not sustain the momentum and lost 21-15, 19-21, 21-19 in an hour and 10 minutes.

- The doubles combination of MR Arjun and Dhruv Kapila then came close to doubling India's lead against the Chinese combination of Chen Bo Yang and Liu Yi, ranked 17 places above them

Lakshya Sen then put India ahead once again with a 21-11, 21-16 win over Lei Lan Xi. It was then left for the debutant doubles combination of Suraj Goala and Pruthvi K Roy or national singles champion Chirag Sen to see India through. They did take the fight to their opponents but fell short. *—ANI*

Nagal battles past Wong, moves into QF

BENGALURU, 15 FEB

Sumit Nagal was put through his sternest test yet by Coleman Wong but the second seeded Indian had enough grunt in him to fight past the Hong Kong man to enter the quarterfinals of the Bengaluru Open here on Thursday.

Nagal won 6-2 7-5 after an hour and 46 minutes of intense battle. But the beginning belied the struggles awaited Nagal in the later stages of the match. Nagal continued the pattern of earning an early break when he went up 2-0 in the opening set. But it was not all smooth sailing as the 26-year-old had to battle past from 0-30 down in the very next game to hold his serve.

Nagal got another break in the eighth game to bag the first set 6-2. But the 19-year-old Wong had more fight in him in the second set. After the first four games went by serve, the Hong Kong player broke Nagal in the fifth game, and it was the first time the Indian dropped his serve in this tournament.

Wong found his serves and ground shots going during this passage, as Nagal looked a tad perplexed by the unexpected fightback. However, the world No. 98 broke back in the sixth game itself to restore the parity at 3-3, though it was more the result of his rival committing a couple of unforced errors. *—PTI*